

Last Choice by Pondermoniums

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: A sprinkling of University - au, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Billy's mom has a cat, Clubbing, Coffee Shops, Dancing, Discussion on non-consensual drug use, Discussions on Therapy, Explicit Sexual Content, F/F, Gay Pride, Homophobic Language, If you've been in a club you know what goes on, M/M, Molestation, Mugging, New York City, Protective Billy Hargrove, Sassy Robin is Sassy, Self-Esteem Issues, Soft Billy Hargrove, Steve Harrington Needs a Hug, Steve Harrington is a Sweetheart, Steve bakes, Steve gets the flu, Switching, Violence, bisexual discovery, discussions on cheating, injuries, use of alcohol

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Summary:

At some point, you just have to admit that something's wrong with you. Because three times being cheated on—in a row—just really beckoned for Steve to self-reflect in a bad way.

So he did what any sensible person would do whose love life is an absolute mess. He goes to the most notorious gay club in town.

1. Bonfire

Author's Note:

What decade is this in? I don't even know. It started out with Steve being in the '80s or '90s, but then I wanted these bois texting, so it's become an overlap between canon and modern era. And it wasn't meant to be NYC, just a nameless city, but then I wanted to make specific references.

And does Billy have short hair or long? Dunno. You can decide haha I'm clearly flying by the seat of my pants, smashing all of my favorite things together into one fic: clubbing/dancing, coffee shop, text flirting, and soft soft bois.

At some point, you just have to admit that something's wrong with you. Because three times being cheated on—in a row—just really beckoned for Steve to self-reflect in a bad way.

Alright, the relationships weren't exactly *serious*, but they never got to *become* serious because, apparently, Steve isn't Main Dish material. More like a thing on the side with other side dishes. He wasn't the first choice.

But then *he's* the one getting beaten up for it. How the hell is that fair? He doesn't believe in hitting women, but fuck, it wasn't his fault the first girl turned out to be looser than a pair of thrift shop jeans. Or how the second's boyfriend took so long planning a proposal, the girl considered herself neglected and justified in finding herself a boy toy. Or how the third's boyfriend was on a three-month business trip.

Maybe hold women accountable instead of Steve's face, huh? That's all he wanted.

Well. Not all he wanted. Someone to take up space in his little studio apartment would be nice. Someone who chose him first. Instead of second. Or third.

So he did what any sensible person would do whose love life is an absolute mess. First, he let his face heal up—*Thank you, mom, for good genes. My nose is my best feature and the biggest liability*—and went to the doc's for a sex germ check up. Steve may be an idiot, but he wasn't completely stupid. Three loose women in the big city? Steve swallowed his pride and tried not to vomit at the co-pay of his insurance. It would be another couple of months with two meals a day and relying on natural light to get through utilities payments, but he'd manage.

Then he went to a gay nightclub. With the number of times he'd heard women rant about how nice they were to just go and dance, how much of a *relief* they were, he figured, why not? There'd be girls there he could talk to without trying to interpret smoke signals. He could just talk and laugh and bump shoulders without waiting for any boyfriend to show up. Sure, he'd be incognito as homosexual for the night, which meant the guys might be an issue, but at this point, Steve wasn't worried. He'd been in other clubs before. You just kind of dance in a different direction if someone's coming on too strong, or use the bar or bathroom as a reason to get the hell out of there. Two minutes was all it took for someone to forget you in a crowded building where everyone was high on strobe lights, music, and alcohol.

And he wasn't anyone's first choice, right?

The only speed bump he hit was getting dressed. What the hell did people wear to gay clubs? It was just like any other club, wasn't it? Just differently interested people. Steve was pretty sure his upstairs neighbor was gay, or at least bisexual. The guy certainly wore more colors than your average straight guy. Steve was also certain he'd seen eyeliner at some point.

Steve settled on jeans and a hot pink t-shirt. Enough girls had told him his butt looked nice in them and that they liked his blush, so he made sure his hair was in its best glossy, floppy state, and considered himself ready. He pushed his key ring around one of the belt loops and pocketed enough money in a clip with his ID to get him a drink and a cab home.

That is, if he got into the club in the first place. Steve's heart nearly

broke out of his chest to flee down the street when the bouncer stopped him at the door. “Hold on. I got a question for you.”

Steve tried not to stare at the blue glitter on the man’s dark face. Was he dressed wrong? What sort of things qualified someone as gay enough to enter a gay bar? Did Steve radiate “I’ve been beaten up three times by angry boyfriends, please just let me dance somewhere in peace?”

“That’s a *Charlie’s Angels* shirt.”

Steve blinked stupidly and glanced down at it. How the hell did the guy know that? The front was blank, but the back had the show name with the women’s silhouettes in black.

“Wha’d’you like about that show?”

Steve shrugged, out of time for whatever the right answer might be. “Kate Jackson looks like my mom. Farah Fawcett’s hairspray got me through high school.”

The big man laughed and clapped his shoulder. Steve had never felt smaller in his life, but at least it was in a good way. “Kate Jackson! No shit? Right on, man. Enjoy yourself.”

He opened the door and pulsing music entered the street. Steve knew he probably grinned like a goon but couldn’t help the gleeful “Thanks!” that burst out of him.

It was definitely like any other club—a Mecca of music, pulsing bodies, and alcohol. And Steve felt oddly comfortable. It was the immediate relief that washed over him that made a curious smile lift his lips. He couldn’t really see a dance floor, packed as the place is, but he didn’t feel the need to gawk at the men gyrating against each other. Or the women making out against the bar. High school Steve definitely would’ve stared, but twenty-five year old Steve just wanted to see how strong of a mai tai the bartender could make.

“Hi!” he chirped, realizing too late that the architecture of the place somehow blocked noise around the bar. Great for ordering drinks, less so for trying not to come across like a gay club cherry popper.

The bartender's drawn, pastel rainbow brows—*Rainbrows? Oh Steve, you're going to get kicked out so fast*—lifted before she giggled. "First time here?"

"Is it obvious?" he apologized, peeking up at the balcony hanging over the bar that was so good at creating a cave where one could hear themselves think. The bartender had long, pastel purple hair drawn up into a faux Mohawk pony tail, and black lipstick to go with her sleek tuxedo jacket. Steve tried not to look at her bare skin underneath it.

"The new timers are always a little more energetic," she appeased. She was very pretty. "What can I get you?"

"What do the regulars drink?"

"Shots," she poised an elbow on the bar like a challenge, but then tipped her head. "Or beer."

"Really? Nothing fancy?"

She lifted her sculpted, colorful brows again. "You feeling fancy?"

Steve let himself grin as confirmation slowly tilted his head. "Yeah," he nodded with more confidence. "Make me something fancy."

She seemed to consider that and then went about it with gusto. Steve took the time to lean back against the bar, and properly absorb the place. The club is surprisingly massive. The entrance is to his left, and the balcony above him and the bar circles around to the right, all the way along the wall, opposite side, and down a staircase. Further along the first floor, the flow of humanity hints at more rooms beyond, as well as different colored lights peeking overhead. He wondered if each room had a different theme. There definitely had to be more than one bar; there was just no way that one bartender could cater to all of this—

"Do you want an open tab?"

Steve rotated back around to see the impressively tall Collins glass crowned with a circle of lemon, a maraschino cherry, and a freaking blueberry. *Gay bars have more fruit?* The contents faded from a

caramel, tea-like brown, all the way to a midnight blue that looked black without a light on it. Steve held the metal straw as he said, “No thanks, I’ll pay now. This looks great.”

“A Long Island Night Out,” she named.

Steve liked how the center of the lemon slice held the straw in place for him. “It’s good! Will you judge me if I eat the fruit?”

“Only if you plan on making out with somebody tonight.”

Steve snorted, earning an odd look from her. He popped the blueberry into his mouth. “Then I’ll feast.”

Her attention wandered over him, but he couldn’t tell if she was suspicious or just pitying. “You know, most people come here to hook up.”

Her eyes plummeted to his gulp that drained a third of the glass. He answered easily despite the burn of alcohol, “I’ve had enough hookups for a while.” He wasn’t the Keg King of Hawkins, Indiana for nothing. Though, for all the title granted him back then, it really just made him good at drinking.

“Oh. So you’re moping tonight.”

He nodded so his fringe bounced over his eyes. “Yeah. Basically.”

For a split second, she stared at him, and then laughter burst out of her. “Well,” she coughed, back into composure, “you’re in my saloon. Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” he chuckled, accepting the receipt tray she gave him. “I haven’t stooped low enough to dump my problems on other people. Yet.”

The numbers on the check might induce otherwise, though, sheesh. There went Steve’s drink and cab fare. At least it wasn’t raining tonight. With his money clip now only holding his ID, he slid the tray back across the bar. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks,” she sang appreciatively. “A man who tips.”

Steve frowned at her during another gulp. The drink got sweeter as he went through it. "People don't tip well here?"

"What, you think gays tip any better than straights? Men are men." Bubbles exploded in Steve's glass since the straw took the brunt of his surprise. The bartender chuckled. "God bless the lesbians who do, though."

They both turned to someone leaning their whole top half onto the bar. Steve recognized the tactic for the bartender's full attention. "God bless lesbians, periodt! Can I get a vodka tonic, Mimi?"

Mimi. Steve observed the pastel goth with new eyes—and the way hers lingered on the newcomer. Steve could read a smoke signal when it was a whole damn bonfire. He couldn't blame Mimi one bit, either; the woman's freckly beak of a nose was cute, especially in the middle of her glossy, black curls. She had bold features that worked together nicely. Cute, in a *I eat straight men for breakfast with my pinkie up* sort of way. Oddly enough, Mimi somehow came across as the sweet one.

His straw fizzled loudly as he finished his beverage and stood from the bar. "Thanks, Mimi. I'll be around."

"Thanks for the warning. I ought to know your name then."

That took him by surprise. "Steve," he gave with a small smile.

"Should I have a second Night Out waiting for you, Steve?"

"No, but maybe a glass of water. I'm gonna dance."

He left the ladies with that, and began the wrestling match that was navigating the crowd of dancers, bystanders, and people already on second base with their hookups—

"Woop! Sorry, friend!" someone called behind them when Steve got a face full of a sweaty arm and summer berry perfume.

"No problem!" he called back, thinking that was way nicer than any other club he'd been to. He liked it here. Mimi was nice, the drinks were strong, and as the latter began to slink through his bloodstream,

Steve could appreciate the fruity perfumes, the whiskey colognes, and just how much damn glitter adorned the floor. He wasn't making it out alive without a fuck-load of shiny micro plastic on him.

But he didn't mind. His body moved with the music, read the sway of everyone around him like a language learned at birth, but only spoken at midnight. With everyone's bodies pressed together, no one pays him much mind. No one thinks the guy dancing alone is pathetic. In a way, everyone is alone here, and everyone is together.

The music lifts his arms up, and to his surprise and glee, those around him do the same, arms rising in a wave through the room. It's heady and electrifying, being the epicenter of something. Someone makes eye contact with him, smiling and laughing which he returns before moving on.

Steve decides to think of the front room as the purple room. Mimi's Saloon. Because the room immediately beyond it was full of hot pink neon. And then after that is neon blue. Yellow neon marked the way to the bathrooms and of course the customary red-orange for exit signs. Steve liked the pink room. The floor was a bunch of light squares that changed color. He didn't know who controlled that light panel, but it seemed like a great gig.

A woman touched his shoulder while he was otherwise staring down. "You blend in!" she laughed, gesturing to his shirt.

He could only laugh back, grinning like a fool in the pink haze. In short order, her friends crowded around her. Steve didn't blame them for their buddy system—

"Are you alone?" one of the others asked.

"Yeah, why?" he hunched a little for his voice to carry directly to her.

The girls annexed him all but immediately. "What! No way!"

"Dance with us!"

"I want your hair routine after this song!"

"Oh my god, I love your moles!"

Steve's brain was officially floating in Long Island Night Out and he couldn't be happier. He and the ladies made a ring in the middle of the dance floor like their own little sanctum. They let Steve twirl them and twirled him right back. When a guy began to try and separate Steve from the sanctum, they directly grabbed Steve with shouts of "This one's our territory! Fuck off!"

And then they *apologized*. "I'm so sorry, did you want to be picked up? You looked surprised in a bad way."

Girls were just amazing.

"Thanks," Steve huffed, out of breath from dancing and from the surprise of a man's hand on his groin. "I'm going to get some water."

"Yeah! Fuck, I'd kill for a lemonade," one of them agreed, and followed him back to the purple room. Mimi and her girlfriend perked up when Steve and company crash-landed on their bar.

"I'll take that water now," he grinned tiredly.

"Steve, I don't make money from water," she retorted, but pointed the water hose into a glass. She began passing waters over the bar, apart from a lemonade topped with a float of whiskey.

Yeah, but water's free, he said to nobody...

"Heads up, ladies."

Steve et al looked at Mimi's girlfriend and the swing of her head in the direction of two men sauntering to the bar. At first, Steve didn't understand the warning, but between the change in all women present, and the way the guys were looking around—half fascinated and half like they were waiting for some sort of punch line—Steve realized they were straight.

Steve gently put his arm around Mimi's girlfriend. To her affronted look, he murmured, "Stand on my other side." Curiosity eclipsed her features and she let him take her place as he peeked up at Mimi. The cords of her neck stood out while she inhaled. She immediately poured a half pint of beer and set it in front of him. He drank it without a word as they all weathered for whatever storm was about

to land.

“Hey, beautiful. How about an Irish Car Bomb?”

Steve felt the grimace ripple through the women beside him. Mimi replied smoothly, “We don’t do those here.”

The man snorted. Steve knew the type. Same age range as him, and convinced his dick was the center of the universe. “What do you mean? It’s money for alcohol. This is a business right?”

“You’re right,” she acquiesced, “but there’s no point when the drink curdles and idiots think I’m to blame. Or they get clever and the result is a chipped tooth.”

Steve, and probably everyone in the club, knew at least one person who’d dropped a shot glass of something in their beer and then broke a tooth drinking it. He personally thought Irish Car Bombs were unpleasant before or after it curdled.

“Two beers, then,” the guy relented. Steve glanced at him but found his friend looking at the line of women on Steve’s other side. Then both of them were staring. Like dogs to meat, these two.

“You’re not subtle about it,” Steve remarked.

The one who’d ordered the beers, the more stout of the two, looked at him. “Subtle ‘bout what?”

“This is the wrong place to pick up girls,” Steve enunciated. Some nearby dancers glanced back at them.

The other guy looked like he’d just been caught by his dad at something. Steve wondered if he really was gay, or at least trying to figure that out. But he’d brought along the wrong wingman.

“We’re bisexual,” he huffed. “And it’s none of your business.”

“You’re right about that. But the first thing you do is catcall the bartender, who happens to be my friend. Not a good first impression, man.”

“You take your first impression and shove it up your ass. Or get off the bar to ask someone else to do it for you. What’s with the half glass? You on a diet?”

Steve couldn’t help the slight grimace on his face. “Dude, it’s a big place. I’m not telling you to leave. Just apologize, take your beers, and walk.”

Plenty of room for two dickheads, he keeps to himself.

The situation seemed to diffuse, somewhat, as the guy shrugged and his companion anxiously gulped his beer. “It’s the service industry. Nothing a good tip can’t apologize for, right?”

Mimi didn’t reply. There was nothing to say to a blatant insult like that. Steve didn’t look to see if she was trying to communicate with him. The issue was right in front of him, not the woman just doing her job. Frankly, her lack of agreeing with the guy proved enough to set him back on Steve. “So what are you? The prince of the palace?”

Steve felt the grin on his face before he thought better of it. *Here’s my grave. Let’s lie down.* “Yeah, that’s right.”

He looked down his nose at Steve. “I’ve seen you around. Preppy little rich kids all look the same. Your pussies smell just as spoiled as your hair.”

Steve didn’t bite. He answered smoothly, “Answer me something, because I’m curious.”

He glanced back at his friend, who didn’t seem to be paying attention—or was desperately trying to find a way to leave the situation. Steve knew what he was doing: evaluating his numbers before a fight. He didn’t seem bothered by being solo. *Then again, he is bigger than me...*

“Know what, sure. Go ahead. What’s your question?”

Steve’s hand closed around the base of his glass. “If you wanted a fight, why didn’t you go to a boxing gym? I hear they like people who think on their feet instead of their head.”

Steve thought it was a nice line. Hard to say whether the asshole did

too, because either way, a mean left hook would've thrown Steve against the bar if he hadn't ducked. With glass in hand, Steve chucked its contents in the man's face. He'd been in enough clubs to know that anybody could just dissolve in a crowd—as dick number two was currently trying to do—so they needed identifying features, like a bloody nose or a soaked shirt.

Or a hot pink t-shirt.

Which the guy grabbed and *did* finally throw Steve against the bar. His lungs were shot, and he was aware of people yelling around him, but he still had his glass in hand. He didn't need much air to bring it against the guy's head. Beer, glass, and blood spilled over the glitter-ridden floor.

In what seemed like an instant, the big bouncer from outside was there, lifting Steve up by his bright shirt—

Feral women's voices swarmed around Steve as he felt himself yanked down like a rag doll. A dozen arms wrapped around him, fingertips like claws digging into his torso, holding him so the bouncer had to listen to them.

“No, NO! *He's* fine! It's *those* assholes.”

“HIM! He threw the first punch!”

“Get that asshole out of here!”

“His friend in the blue shirt! He ran that way!”

The bouncer hauled the guy off while another went after his friend. For a fight that came and went in less than two minutes, Steve felt like it took him a while to catch his breath. The ladies set him back on his feet and rubbed his back.

“Are you okay? No broken ribs? Careful—”

They moved down the bar to make room for the glass being swept up. He rubbed a hand over himself, careful in case a rib did twang painfully. “I think I'm okay... I'll let you know. Thanks.”

He laughed breathily, but they didn't leave him. First being felt up, and now *this*...maybe women—especially gay ones—knew about violence better than he'd ever given them credit for. But Steve didn't like how easy he was to shake up, nor how it could be read on his face...

He stared at the familiar Collins glass arriving before him. He looked up at Mimi, who wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "You deserve it."

"Do I?" he laughed again. "I don't think I won."

"Just take it."

"I can't pay."

Mimi planted her hands wide on the counter. "Steve. Rags like that walk in here all the time. Nobody ever checks them on it. Granted, if they did, then we'd probably run out of glasses pretty quick."

He twisted the straw in the lemon circle with a polite bow of his head. "Sorry about that."

"Appreciated, and if you ever come back, maybe just ignore them like the rest of us?"

He frowned around the straw, sipping with discontent. "How do you put up with that shit? There's no way he was actually going to tip you. Never mind that he made it seem like you're disposable for chump change."

Mimi's girlfriend slid over to bump shoulders with him. "You're such a knight in armor."

"He's an angel, Feiga," Mimi teased. "Didn't you see his shirt?"

"Oh yeah," she sang, leaning to read his back.

"Feiga?" he repeated.

"It's Yiddish," she nodded. "It means fig, or bird, or something. Stuff of legend. Look, being naïve is cute, but this club isn't a secret. It may be a safe haven for most of us, but it's also a beacon for bullshit."

Steve gulped in order to say, “But it’s not cool for people to be allowed to act like that—”

“You should’ve planted your feet.”

The voice came too close to be meant for someone else, so Steve looked to his other side, and....in a word? *Attractive* is what Steve would call the guy who leaned against the bar. The kind of handsome that stopped the air in your lungs. Long, dark lashes framed eyes that were a little groggy, or drunk—or arrogant—as he gazed at Steve. His dark lashes and brows stood in contrast to his caramel blond hair. It was curly, but with big curls. Kinda fluffy. Soft. A dangly gold earring winked at him.

“Sorry?” Steve managed. The guy’s eyes lifted to Mimi, and Steve saw that they were actually very awake, and very blue. Blue like water, so the shadows and neon around them played in the translucent irises.

“Whiskey. Neat.”

Well that didn’t give Steve enough time to look at the rest of him, but he did see the man’s exposed chest and the fact that his garnet shirt had snaps instead of buttons. He planned on it coming off quickly.

He didn’t so much as frown at Steve’s drink, but he did nod towards it. “What’s that?”

“A Long Island Night Out.” For some reason, Steve felt like an idiot saying the name, but he didn’t have anything witty to say either.

Those bold brows moved as he calculated the different types of alcohol running through Steve’s system. “Ahh. You’re on a mission, huh?”

The fluid level dropped in the glass while Steve gulped. “To what? Put assholes in their place?”

The man laughed—*Ooh, nice teeth.*

Nice teeth? Steve recoiled on himself. He considered his own mouth bones to be rather square, but—

Jesus Christ, self-deprecate tomorrow.

“Apt choice of words. But I was saying, you need to plant your feet. That’s why he was able to knock you around like that.”

Thanks, but there’s not much I can do when I’m lifted off the ground.

Steve didn’t say it. He wished he did. Six months ago, or even an hour ago, he would have, but now he felt over sensitive and a little too fragile. Like his chest was too cramped and his heart dangled off a frayed string. So he didn’t say anything; just worked on his drink with the intention of sweating it out and going home.

“Do I need to buy you another one of those to get your name?”

Steve’s eyes swept toward him. It hadn’t occurred to him that the guy might be picking him up. His heart buoyed up a little; enough to counter, “What’s yours?”

A pleased, warm smile teased at his lips. “Charlie.”

Steve’s eyes flicked off his mouth while his features flattened. “Are you saying that because of my shirt?”

That smile again. His head even bowed like he might be bashful.

“Billy. My name’s Billy. You got me.”

However high Steve’s heart climbed, it didn’t know where to go. It was easier to sink back down. His mouth back on his straw, he held out his hand. “Steve.”

Those eyes flashed, like maybe he didn’t expect to get it so easily, but he took his time sliding his hand over Steve’s. And then he just...held it. “Steve... Why do you sound sad?”

Steve didn’t know what to make of this hand holding thing—definitely didn’t want to linger on why it felt *nice*. Strong but gentle fingers; Steve felt a ring or two press over his skin. Billy’s touch felt intimate without being intrusive.

“I’m out of clever things to say.” His straw gurgled and he removed

his hand from Billy's to stabilize himself as he set the glass on the counter under the bar. "Thanks, Mimi."

She was busy working on another drink a little ways down, but her eyes moved between him and Billy. Steve couldn't read her expression, and he reckoned he only had a few songs left in him anyways.

"Nice meeting you," he finished, and stepped sideways to be enclosed within the crowd.

The alcohol sinking over his brain helped Steve sway with the crowd. Helped him appreciate the music. He hadn't explored the upstairs yet, so he migrated up the stairs and discovered people in semi-circular booths. Frilly silver tinsel wands waved around a birthday party popping champagne. Glow sticks fell off a table—the pair making out completely oblivious to the general public being able to see the hands shoved down pants. Another birthday group were screaming over a cake with sparklers instead of candles.

Steve didn't know how anybody kept track of who were allowed in the v.i.p. booths, because there seemed to be just as many dancers up here as downstairs. Another bar too, this one manned by a black guy looking as elegant as Mimi. Steve saw in passing how he wore a black waistcoat and grey contact lenses.

Then he found the yellow and orange room. Fissures of yellow neon in concrete walls burned orange on the edges like fire. It was perhaps the only room acting more like a lounge than a dance room, but that may have been because the bathrooms were here. Steve greeted the attendant standing out of the way of the sinks, looking like they had ten other things they'd rather be doing than making sure no one doped up in the stalls.

After relieving himself, he washed his hands and turned to lift his shirt up, checking his backside. No bruises yet, but a wide bar of irritated, flushed skin suggested there'd be otherwise tomorrow—

The door opened—had been opening the whole time; the bathrooms might as well use a revolving door—and Billy's red shirt was brighter in the bathroom's lighting. His eyes sparked on finding Steve, and he

crooned at his reflection, “Fancy.”

If he meant to finish, *meeting you here*, it evaporated at the inflamed hash mark on Steve’s back. He switched back to looking at Steve directly. “That’ll be a sight when you wake up.”

“Yeah,” he had to agree. He worked his shirt back down. “Nothing broken, though.”

The traffic flow moved Billy on to the urinals, and Steve slipped out. He found a narrow stairwell, cramped like everywhere else, that fed into the blue room. Steve spent some time there before returning to the pink room. A couple of his sanctum friends had returned there and let him bob to the music with them. Eventually the others rejoined too, but the hunt for a bed partner had officially begun. At one point, Steve glanced over to see one making out with someone against the wall, and another doing the same in the corner—

He bumped the person behind him a little hard and called, “Oh, sorry!”

Except it’s Billy.

Steve frowns at him, ready to throw a teasing accusation of stalking at him, but Billy just smiles in his polite—mixed with mischief, and Steve didn’t dare allow himself to think the guy was *happy* to see him—way and beats him to it. “Are you dancing alone?”

Steve chooses to not really grace that with an answer, so he shrugs like he doesn’t care and prepares to ease himself away—

Billy faces him, halting Steve in his tracks over the fact that he just completely turned is back on whoever he’d been dancing with. “Why? Pretty boy like you could have anyone you wanted in here.”

Steve can’t help leaning forward with wide eyes before rearing back with laughter. “That’s not true!” His mirth evened out into giggles as he wiped his face and moved his hair behind his ear.

Billy just watches him, a small, content smile on his lips. Steve tilts his head and sees a smaller guy slowly losing his patience for his partner to turn back around. “Aren’t you dancing with somebody?”

That earring winked pink at him. “More interested in you.”

Steve’s brows lifted and then came back down with the wrinkling of his nose. “You know, comin’ onto me in every room of this place, I’m gonna think you’re stalking me.”

It was Billy’s turn to pitch forward with his laughter. Steve held his ground as Billy said real close, “I’m not, promise. But you *are* easy to find. You feeling better?”

“From the fight?” Steve dodged. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

He tilted his head with lifted brows like *Gotcha*. They weren’t really dancing anymore, just standing and swaying out of the way of the crowd. Steve was nothing if not able to meet a challenge. “I’ve had a bad streak.”

“So? Streaks end. Even faster if you let me flirt with you.”

The balls on this guy, damn. Steve laughed, “Does that work? Being a proud piece of shit?”

Billy grinned wolfishly, and it struck Steve right in his soft, fragile center. Something about it hit more honestly than anything Billy had yet thrown at him. “You tell me.”

Steve shrugged again. “Worked for me in high school until I fell in love. Hasn’t worked for me since.”

“Maybe you’ve just got poor taste.”

Okay, Steve thought bitterly. There had to be a line drawn between him being over sensitive, and Billy’s uncanny ability to injure as he pleased. “Careful about saying that if you’re trying to flirt with me.”

Steve had meant to gesture in the air, but with Billy as close as he is, Steve wound up giving his chest a poke. His hand retracted, only to be caught in Billy’s. His grasp wasn’t tight or threatening. He played with Steve’s fingers.

"I don't have poor taste. And I like you, so don't let a bad streak wear you out."

Steve felt his cheeks warm up. "I'm flattered, but I didn't come for a hookup. I came here to dance."

Far from bothered, Billy declared, "So dance with me."

"Are you angling to feel me up?" Steve lifted a brow, but the tension had passed. He let Billy pull on his hand, the rest of him following to move with him and the music.

"Would you let me?" Billy huffed.

"Not really."

"Then I won't."

Huh, Steve mused, and some of it might have escaped into his voice or expression, because Billy poked his cheek. It was so light, it took a second for Steve to realize what happened, and then Billy was laughing at his dumbfounded face. Steve laughed too, because holy shit, this guy was fucking *cute* when he wasn't being an ass.

Feeling bold, Steve told him so. "You're cute when you're not being an ass."

"I know."

"Okay," his eyes rolled so hard his head went with them as he leaned away, "that's the last compliment I'm giving you."

Billy tugged him forward with a spin so Steve's back met Billy's chest. Billy took his hands as they swayed, honoring his word to not touch Steve's body despite very much having his arms around him. "That's the first compliment you've given me."

The side of Steve's mouth crooked up, grinning lopsidedly. Warmth tingled straight from his ear to his groin, and pin-balled all over his chest in between. He didn't really feel the need or desire to overthink it. He just turned his head to face Billy—so close—and taunted, "And the last."

But he blinked as Billy released his hand to move sweaty strands clinging to Steve's temple. "Will you let me buy you a drink finally? Maybe I can soak one out of you."

Steve turned back around, but Billy's hand lingered in his hair. Fingertips slid behind his ear, the pad of a thumb stroking his earlobe. Steve's nose wrinkled again, and Billy's eyes flicked to it as he laughed, "I don't know about that line, but I'm leaving soon anyways."

"What? Why?"

He almost sounds genuinely *upset* that Steve's not staying longer. What a nice feeling.

Steve nibbles the inside of his lip with a shy smile, touching Billy's chin with a curved finger. His eyes locked on the discrete stubble there, then the parted lips above it. "I'm flattered, but I gotta walk home. I'm gonna get some water before I leave, so you can walk me to the bar? Or find someone else to dance with."

He left Billy with that, shouldering his way in the direction of the purple room and Mimi's bar. The crowd opened just enough for him to pass through, but not without rubbing front and back against—

His head swiveled around at Billy, whose hand filled his. Steve's closed around it almost gratefully, and then it felt...thrilling, in a completely natural sort of way. Steve shoved that as well onto the back burner for another day.

As they were, either Billy's stature or simply having another person with him parted the crowd a little better. Steve placed his free hand on the bar and called to Mimi, "Two waters, please, Mimi!"

His gaze found Feiga next, and smiled, but hers were glued to his and Billy's hands parting before she smiled a greeting at him. Neither women said anything. Steve guessed, with the club in full swing, they had settled into whatever routine they kept. Steve's attention returned to Billy when the latter chimed, "You know, I'm celebrating."

He laughed at Steve's dopey, wide eyes as he gulped water. "What?" he gasped. "You're still trying to get me to stay, aren't you?"

"No! I'm legitimately celebrating something."

"If you'd told me sooner, I would've gotten one of those tinsel wands upstairs for you."

Billy laughed before sipping his own water. "I've come into a lot of money recently."

Steve's gulp turned into a melodramatic groan. "Ugh, I get it! I'm hot, you want my ass. You don't need to wave a bank account around—"

Billy barely caught his mouth before water spewed. Steve considered the night officially well spent. He grinned smugly as Billy wagged water off his hand. "You get mouthy when you're set off, huh?"

"It's gotten me into more than one fight, tonight included."

"I'll let it slide if you let me buy you that drink. Even if it is that hang over potion you were chugging down earlier."

"I'll have you know," Steve pivoted to face him with an elbow on the bar, "that I was the Keg King of my hometown. And let me tell you, the moonshine in Bum Fuck, Indiana does not mess around. I'm totally fine."

"Keg King? That right?" Steve nodded and, despite his best efforts, watched Billy lean in close while licking his lips. "I would blow your record into the dirt."

"Oh yeah? You're awfully quiet about the moonshine, though."

Billy peeked up from his water to see Steve tweaking an eyebrow at him and his head sliding over his neck, pulsing cockily with the music. That beautiful throat worked around his swallow so he could exclaim, "You're a little shit!"

Steve dropped the bravado to giggle and bow his head, hunching his shoulders when Billy shoved his head, only to rake his fingers through Steve's hair. He didn't pull or linger, just made his wants

known. Steve decided he shouldn't drag the guy along, and like a divine intervention, someone Billy knew claimed his attention.

Knew *well*, since Billy initiated a boisterous hug full of laughter and back slapping—

A grip on Steve's wrist turned him to Mimi reaching over the bar. Her features were sharp as she made a pointed glance at Billy and then at him. "Steve. I *wouldn't* recommend it."

Steve's lips parted, frowning a little. He still intended to go home alone, but his curiosity asked, "Why?"

Feiga leaned into him. "He's got a reputation, sweetie."

For what, a big dick? Steve almost japed, but he knew enough about lesbians at this point to not be disrespectful. "For what, exactly?"

Mimi answered, "Let's say, that he's normally the one starting fights when you're not around, and not because anybody deserves it."

Steve didn't know what to do with that information. He barely knew Billy and didn't intend to know him past, well, right now. He nodded so Mimi would release his arm and he set his glass on her counter. "Where's the exit?"

Feiga's head turned away from her Americano with surprise. She threw a thumb over her shoulder. "The out door is on this side."

"Thanks, ladies. I had fun. Thanks for the drinks, Mimi. Sorry I was a bother."

The hand holding a towel landed on her hip, her face pinching with concern, but Steve ducked and slid out of the club with relative ease. The out door stood at the front of the building, dressed with a neon sign telling people to use the queue through the alleyway.

Entering the street felt like a spell breaking. Ochre street lighting draped around him. The quiet traffic moved over asphalt and pavement glistening with humidity and the first signs of dew. The city never sleeps, but it was quiet and real. The fantasy of the club was left behind him, and yet Steve felt like he might be walking

through a painting of some tortured World War 2 veteran who captured the mumbo jumbo his coworker ranted about. The surreal dichotomy of reality in a dream and a dream in reality—

“Steve! Hey, Steve!”

Well shit, here comes the dream right now, Steve thought incredulously, recognizing that voice. Billy was jogging to catch up, his blond curls bouncing and glowing the same way pink neon haloed his hair.

“You were serious about walking home,” he laughed, slowing down to walk the last few steps.

Steve shrugged with his hands in his jean pockets. “Nothing but my ID and an empty money clip to my name, so...”

Unfazed, Billy asked, “Can I walk you home?”

That wiped Steve’s face for a moment. “Can you wa—” Then he reeled, “*Who are you?*”

“Prince Charming, obviously,” Billy sassed and gestured, “You going in this direction?”

“Yeah, but—cards on the table—I’m not bringing you home, Billy.”

“I’m offering to bring *you* home, dummy. Pretty thing like you will get eaten alive out here.”

“I got here fine on my own,” Steve returned, unsure how he felt about being made a damsel. “I *do* live here. I’m not some tourist in the city.”

“Listen,” Billy hushed, doing that thing where he came in real close. Steve tried to ignore the goddamn *comfort* in his chest when Billy’s arm snaked around his waist, high on his ribs to turn him around. “See the alleyway over my shoulder? See a head pokin’ out of it?”

He sure did. About a block down, a man with buzzed hair leaned against a building, casual but taking too many glances in Steve’s direction. “Yeah.”

“Popular mugging spot. My first time in the area, they got twenty bucks off me.”

“Really?” Steve chirped.

Billy’s head tilted. “Distracted him long enough so I could land a good first hit. Got my money back with some change.”

Steve snorted softly. “Did it ever occur to you that people only do that because they’ve got nothing else?”

Billy leaned back to stare at him. The distance made his hand slide a little down Steve’s back. “I’m definitely walking you home. You’re way too fucking nice.”

Steve laughed breathily as Billy took his hand, tugging him across the street and a few blocks down before glancing behind them and relaxing. A thumb stroked the back of Steve’s hand, before he let go. Steve returned his hands to his pockets.

“What kind of celebration is it to walk me home?”

“Don’t I get to choose how to celebrate?”

“I guess. Is it your birthday?”

“Nope. Kind of the opposite. My dad died.”

Steve looked at him strolling with his hands in his pockets—of a jacket he hadn’t worn in the club. Steve remembered vaguely passing a coatroom but waved that train of thought aside. But not before Billy noticed where he was looking. “You cold?”

“No, I...is *celebrate* the right word there?”

“I’m not celebrating my dad,” Billy scoffed. For all the times Billy made a point to look at him, Steve noticed how this time, he *didn’t*. His eyes focused ahead, his mouth subtly twisted in open distaste. “It’s nice having my mom back in my life, though. Asshole barred her out of it for so long. Must’ve paid the judge a small fortune for custody.”

“Wait,” Steve caught up, “are you eighteen?”

“No, I’m twenty-five, but my dad had us move when I was younger so my mom lost track of me. I almost didn’t attend the funeral, but the last paper trail—or some lawyer’s good ethics—between them got her there. Let me tell you, it’s been a wild ride since.”

“Why *are* you telling me? I’m just some stranger from a club.”

Billy smirked at him. “Isn’t that who you’re supposed to spill everything to? Kind strangers who are too nice for their own good?”

“Yeah well,” Steve let his weight sag so his stride had him walking in a wobbly line. “Nobody’s ever accused me of great intelligence.”

Billy’s voice turned soft. “You gotta stop doing that.” A light pinch kissed Steve’s arm. “Bringing yourself down like that.”

“No, no, no pity party,” Steve assured. “I’m glad your life’s coming together for you. You deserve it. I know what a douchebag parent is, at least.”

“Hm,” Billy hummed in acknowledgement. He paused when Steve pointed, and followed his stride down a new street. “You’re right. I deserve it.”

Steve snorted with a shake of his head. “Humble.”

They walked a few strides in the quiet hum of the city before Billy remarked, “Tell me you don’t live on the opposite end of the island.”

“What? You don’t want to walk a shit load of miles with me, baby?” Steve taunted. “Meat Packing District is nice this time of night.”

“There’s no way you live that far.”

“Maybe I like walking.”

“I will hail a cab right now—”

“Relax,” Steve chuckled. “This is me.”

Billy was left to gape around the dead end street and the mildly run down façade Steve pointed to. “Oh. I was gonna say, hail a cab back to my place.”

“Your mom live in the city?” Steve dodged. He stepped onto the first stair leading up to the door of the building. Ghoulish fluorescent lighting glowed too brightly through the glass door; reflected off of the wall of steel mailboxes.

“Yeah, she loves it here. Jogs around Central Park every morning.”

“Do you run with her?”

“Cardio’s not my thing. Love showing up the cocky bastards at the gym though. Never expected I’d be good at squash.”

“*Squash*—ha ha!” Steve doubled over.

Billy chuckled with him. “Whatever game is going on, I like to join in. Volleyball, squash, but it’s basketball usually.”

“I played in high school,” Steve shared. “After swimming didn’t work out.”

“You, sluicing through the water?” Billy stepped forward, his voice coy. “Why didn’t that work out?”

Steve inhaled the night air to sigh, “Got injured. Took too long to heal. Discovered weed and girls in the meantime. Whenever a new season came around, waking up at five a.m. for morning work out, staying after school for swimming practice, and weekend swim meets just didn’t really suit me anymore.”

“Next time someone asks, say the speedos were too much for your temptation.”

Oh.

Oh.

Whatever smile Steve had worn slowly disintegrated, passing right over to Billy’s smug lips. “Relax. I think I knew the moment I first

spoke to you. No one ever blows me off like that. Not to be a complete dick, but I know what I look like.”

“Sorry...” Steve mumbled toward his shoes, even though he meant it. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings with that. I really just came to relax, not to start anything.”

“Don’t worry about my feelings. It’s good of you to not pull the bisexual card, though. Bi’s deal with enough bullshit without asshole straights using the label to get away with shit.”

Steve cut right to it. “Is this you telling me to steer clear of the club?”

Billy leaned his head back, taking him in and taking his time answering as he stepped up onto the stair with Steve. “No. On the contrary, I was wondering—no one who’s straight has ever reacted to me touching them like you did. As if you liked it. Like I wasn’t a piece of trash you were just tolerating—”

“You’re not trash. You’re a person.”

Billy looked like the air stopped in his lungs. After a moment of Steve holding his gaze, a weak laugh tore out of him before he pressed his lips together and swallowed. “Steve, are you attracted to me?”

It was Steve’s turn to be taken hostage, captured by those watery irises and soft lashes. His jaw worked in micro movements before he gathered the courage to just say it. “A little bit.”

“A little bit?” Billy repeated, soft yet insistent.

“I-I...” Steve’s breath stuttered before he inhaled for confidence. “I meant it when I said I’m coming off of a bad streak. I...I don’t mean to lead you on, or to get your hopes up.”

He looked back up at him, but Billy seemed to be trying to read something on his face. “Is that what’s stopping you? Not that I’m a guy but that you’re still healing?”

“Billy, I...” Steve heaved a breath, feeling more tired than ever, yet buzzing with nerves. He twirled a finger close to his head. “I’ve got a—a *lot* up here right now, and I can’t think right with you next to me

so... So I guess take that for whatever it is.”

“I will,” Billy crooned, and Steve realized he was smiling. “It’s the first compliment you’ve given me.”

Steve processed that and huffed a curt sound of mirth...

Billy leaned in, and kissed Steve’s cheek.

Just a peck, but Billy stayed close, as if his very proximity would keep Steve upright. Hell, maybe it would, because Steve’s vision went blurry in the way that happens when you just *feel*.

He felt a dopey grin twitch on his face, and that brought him back to find Billy’s gaze. “Goodnight, Steve.”

Billy leaned back to step off the staircase, leaving Steve to utter a rushed, “Goodnight.”

He watched Billy saunter his way out of the side street, turning to ascend the stairs—and tripped right over them. Steve’s hands slapped the bricks and he popped back up before Billy turned around in his periphery. Hopefully.

“I’m fine!” he all but screeched, not daring to look over as he swung the glass door open and rushed into the sanctuary of the stairwell.

Suddenly more awake and jittery than a caffeine trip, Steve took the stairs two at a time and didn’t bother removing the key ring from his belt loop. After what involved uncomfortable yanking on his jeans like he was trying to shove his dick in the lock, Steve stumbled into his apartment.

Steve’s place had two things going for it: an incredibly high ceiling, and a window to match. Two panes across, the window was on the right side of the opposite wall, and came all the way down to the radiator. Steve’s bed—a mattress directly on the floor—sat in that corner between the radiator and the adjacent wall. The morning light always traveled down the wall and onto his bed—a godsend in the winter.

For now, street lights gave his place enough of a glow for him to

navigate to his fairy lights. The recessed lights all the way up in his ceiling had busted his first year of living here, and after telling the landlord four times, Steve decided he didn't need them anyways. It made the place homier anyway, stringing various lights earned from post-Christmas sales around the room. They were all warm, white bulbs now, but he had bundles of lights on the bottom of his bookshelf. Purple and orange for Halloween, green and white for March, multi color for December.

Steve finally managed to get his keys off his jeans so he wouldn't lose them in the morning, and threw his clothes in the laundry corner. The place is shaped loosely like a capital L, with the long side leading to the window, and everything else crammed on the short side. The kitchenette separated the living area from the bathroom, into which Steve threw himself for a much needed hot shower.

There, he began to let the events of the night surge to the forefront of his brain.

At least, until he realized Billy had never gotten his number.

"Oh," Steve murmured under the water, almost laughing at himself because he didn't know what else to do. He rubbed his chest, trying to figure out how he felt about that—how he would feel if he even *had* given Billy his number or vice versa.

Steve decided he'd be a nervous wreck if he actually had Billy's number. He'd never dated a guy. Did he want to date a guy? It honestly hadn't been a consideration at the start of tonight.

He's got a reputation, sweetie.

For what? Sweeping me off my fucking feet?

Steve felt utterly confused. He spent a little longer than usual in the shower to let the hot water sort it out.

It didn't, and he knew that would hurt later when the utilities bill came in. Just to really stew in it, Steve plugged in his hairdryer. He didn't use it often—and his neighbors would probably have words with him tomorrow for using it so late—but it was one of the few

ways Steve pampered himself. Just blowing out his hair while he brushed, letting the noise drown out his thoughts.

Empty head. Big hair. That was Steve's default. At least, he tried for it to be.

A fresh shirt and boxer shorts later, Steve felt sleep creeping up on him despite the unease rolling over in his chest. He poured himself some water, trying to coax his feelings down with every swallow.

You don't have Billy's number. He doesn't have yours. You didn't even bring your cell to the club. Don't have to worry about calling. Don't have to worry about getting a text. Everything's fine. Everything's fine, we're back to square one—

Steve nearly evaporated to a higher astral plane when a knock sounded on his door. Holding his shirt to his wet face, he set his cup down and gave himself a long second to recover while the knocking continued...and stopped on two, slow beats.

An angry neighbor would drum a different melody...right?

Twisting the deadbolt and sliding the chain, Steve opened the door. Billy had a hand on the doorframe. His eyes had been low on the door, but they dragged up Steve's legs and pajamas, blinking like he couldn't tell if he was really there. Billy sighed over a smile that was almost...apologetic. And pleading.

"Cards on the table?"

Steve's mouth is hanging open. His heart bounced off the window like a squash ball and back into his chest. "How did," he began but his voice went husky. He swallowed and tried, "How'd you know which door was mine?"

Billy laughed nervously. Nervously? It was a different look on him but...a cute one. "Figured you'd be the one using a hairdryer at three a.m."

Empty head and big hair. That was Steve.

So he didn't think.

He stepped into the hallway, right into Billy's space, and slid a hand over the side of his neck to hold him steady as Steve kissed him.

It was a little harder than he'd meant to, but then Billy's lips pushed back, and his arm came around Steve's waist, bringing them flush together like Steve might blow away. His arms went around Billy's neck as a hand buried in Steve's hair, fingertips dragging and sending tingles right to Steve's rapidly filling cock. He gasped against Billy's mouth, a sound escaping him he wasn't sure he'd ever made.

The hand on the back of his head slid down to his nape, guiding Steve back to Billy's mouth. He moaned as Billy walked him backwards into the apartment. He slammed the door behind him and quickly shouldered off his jacket, letting it drop right to the floor. Never letting go of Steve.

Steve, who gripped the two sides of Billy's shirt, and *yanked*. The sound of the snaps tearing open satisfied him to the point of giggles against Billy's lips.

"How long have you been wanting to do that?" he purred, his voice low and making Steve thrum with the sound wave.

He only laughed a little harder in reply, coming back in for a kiss that had his tongue teasing the seam of Billy's lips—

Billy ducked enough to grab the backs of Steve's thighs and *lift*.

"Ohmygod!" he might have yelled if he hadn't been out of air right then. He clutched at Billy's shoulders as the man fucking carried him toward the bed, the flat of his tongue licking up the column of Steve's throat. Steve panted as if he'd been running. "Holy shit, Billy!"

A goddamn *growl* hummed out of his chest, causing Steve to shiver and rub himself against Billy. "You smell so good. I like you clean for me."

Steve snorted into his hair. "Did you actually wait for me to shower—wup!"

Billy dumped him onto the mattress and crawled over him to get a hand on his waist, to lower himself onto an elbow and stroke Steve's

hair. To slide his tongue in between Steve's plump lips and fuck his mouth. Billy tasted sweet.

Steve's hips jerked upward. He caught Billy's leg with his own and pulled him down, gasping at the rough friction of denim on his cock trying to escape his underwear.

"I didn't wait," Billy said huskily. Steve almost forgot what he was talking about as the man gripped the erection sticking out of the boxers' split in the front. Billy kissed the furrow between Steve's brows. "I came back. I had to try. Something—anything you would give me. Fuck, Steve, this..."

He favored kissing Steve to finishing his own sentence. The lazy pulls on the erection between them stopped so Billy could shove a hand up his shirt. Steve absolutely *whined* Billy's name. "Don't stop! Billy?"

"Do you have a condom, baby?" Billy kissed a trail from Steve's mouth, up his cheek, to his temple. "And lube, by chance?"

"Um." Steve blinked, hard, forcing whatever brain cells he still had to smash together. Twisting his arms up and to the side, he pulled the drawer of his bedside table right out to set it on the floor. His knees jerked up with Billy's resuming the slow strokes on his cock. He managed to extract a bottle and condoms from two different boxes.

"I have, um...two kinds?"

His hooded look of lust and inquiry met a blunt, wolfish stare from Billy, who doubled over to laugh against Steve's chest. "What?" Steve squawked.

"Sweetheart, I've never been offered a *choice* before," Billy came back up with a smile that had Steve stuck between wanting to take a picture and smack him.

Maybe Billy read this on his face, because he came back in for a long peck on his lips before easing back on his heels. "I'm overdressed. Hang on."

He made quick work of his shoes, jeans, and the rest, but he settled once more on the bed to a slower Steve turned to the side, removing

his shirt and shorts. Billy read his body language, the careful movements and the drawn up knees. He placed a hand on Steve's back, kissing his shoulder. "Your bruise is showing up now. Are you okay?"

"Just nervous," he shoved his hair behind his ear. "I guess you know I haven't done this before. With a guy."

His words faded into a sigh in the wake of Billy's lips on his shoulder traveling up his neck. Steve's hand found his nape, holding him fondly. He felt Billy's tongue between his lips, tasting his skin.

He came back up to briefly tilt one of the boxes to read the label and plucked the corresponding condom out of Steve's hand. "I'll take care of you. I'll ride you."

Riding wasn't really specific, and Steve said as much. "That could be either way. What do you mean?"

Billy chuckled and tore the condom open, letting the unrolling of it over Steve's erection be answer enough. "Oh. Really?"

Billy laughed openly at that. "I admire your gumption, baby, but the sun will be rising soon. I assume you want to sleep tonight?"

Steve mumbled out a shy, "I guess," which had Billy leaning in to take his lower lip between his teeth.

Steve's cock pulsed against Billy's palm, making the latter pant against Steve's mouth. "Jesus, if I'd known you'd be this ready for me, I'd have told myself to carry you up here the first time."

Steve put his arms around his neck and kissed his cheekbone, his hairline, and after he'd pulled Billy with him to lie on top of him, he leaned up to catch on Billy's earlobe with his teeth. For some reason, Steve only *now* became aware of Billy's own erection kicking against him as he shuddered in Steve's hold. Like a challenge to himself, he pressed his forehead to Billy's neck, looking down and reaching for it. Being on this side made it an awkward, unfamiliar angle, but as Steve gave him slow, twisting pulls, his eyes wandered over Billy's thighs, his hips, and lower tummy.

“You’re beautiful,” he said before he meant to, and if he didn’t have his hand around another guy’s dick, he might have smacked the hand over his mouth. “Sorry—that was—weird. Right—? Mm!”

Billy gripped his head between his hands and pinned Steve against his pillows, ravishing his mouth with his tongue, teeth, and lips. Steve mewled into his mouth, wanton cries passing into Billy as he thrust his cock against Steve’s. The motion of his hips between Steve’s knees made him excited in a crazy way, his vision blurring and imagining Billy totally taking charge of his body instead of offering his own.

In his delirium, he heard Billy huff raggedly, “You can’t just say shit like that. I’m trying to be considerate.”

“Sorry,” he heaved, just trying to catch his breath.

“Don’t say *that*,” Billy hushed, kissing the line of his jaw. “Don’t say that, baby.”

Steve’s hands found Billy’s waist, sliding up over his floating ribs and back down to the teasing curve of his ass and hips. “How do we do this, then?”

Billy eased up to straddle his body, sitting on Steve’s thighs while he popped open the lube. A hefty squirt on his fingertips, and then his thumb spiraled it around his joints. Poising a hand on Steve, Billy balanced himself so his other hand could reach behind him. Steve’s eyes plummeted to what he could see behind Billy’s balls. The flash of knuckles and then—

“This is it. Don’t get scared, now.”

Steve’s eyes widened to the diameter of planetary bodies. “Did you just quote *Home Alone* at me? In *bed*?”

Billy laughed huskily, pushing inside himself. And like a rubber band snapping in Steve’s brain, he wrenched the lube bottle up and squeezed more than he’d ever need into his hand. Letting half of it slough off onto his penis, he gave himself a few strokes over the condom before telling Billy, “Move your hand. I’m getting in there.”

“Oh yeah?” Billy all but snorted. “You ever played with yourself before?”

“Maybe,” he retorted, sounding like a brat in his own ears. In fact he *had*, in the shower before. He’d explored the idea of a girlfriend wearing a strap-on, but his explorations hadn’t yielded enough for him to actually buy one. “I know to be gentle.”

Billy didn’t withdraw his own hand. Instead, he pulled Steve’s in between his legs and positioned his pointer finger to join his own inside. “Follow what you feel me doing.”

Steve couldn’t be sure what surprised him the most, but if he had to guess, it was just how well Billy slid the finger into himself. Steve knew Billy had experience in this, but he’d only managed one finger in the shower, after a lot of patience.

Next had to be Billy’s smell. Not of his ass, but just all of *Billy*. Like a wave, Steve was hit with his rustic sweetness, fringed with a little bit of spice, souring sweat, and fresh cologne lingering from his clothes. Steve wanted to lean up and smell him, to taste him...so he did. Nosing at Billy’s diaphragm and sternum, Steve kissed and licked, tasting salt and neutral skin.

Fingers slid into his hair, gently pulling his head to the side. “Bite me, pretty boy.”

Steve did, right on his nipple. A harsh grip around the areola that had Billy making a delicious sound and shuddering before Steve dragged his teeth over the thin skin to worry at the bud. He spiraled his tongue around it, pushing the red bud around. Billy jerked against him, gasping out, “Another finger. Come on, spread me open.”

Steve’s other hand found Billy’s erection, the thick and weeping head making him hum pleasantly at the discovery. Like he’d found a cupcake instead of a dick leaking precum, but that was a good sign. Billy was enjoying him enough to be messy, and more slipped out to meet Steve’s thumb as he slicked it over the cockhead.

Billy was moving over his hand, thrusting down over Steve’s fingers. He gasped out instructions with impressive clarity and patience,

telling Steve, “Push there—harder—ahm! That’s it. Move your fingertips a little up and down, like you’ve got an itch—oh, *fuck*, yeah. *Ah!* Easy, easy, I could come just with that.”

“Is that a problem?” Steve teased from the other nipple. His eyes lifted from the slew of red signatures his teeth were making to blink up at Billy.

“Thought you wanted to come too?”

“Mmm,” Steve purred, kissing across his chest while he moved his hand over Billy’s cock; slow drags from root to tip and back. “I like to be a giving lover.”

“Well I’m taking, and I’m taking it inside,” Billy growled, once more shoving him back against the pillows.

“Careful!” he exclaimed in a rush of air, his fingers leaving Billy’s body without much grace.

Billy chuckled, walking on his knees up Steve’s lap. “Don’t worry about me, sweetheart.”

All of his focus went to holding Steve’s cock, and lowering himself slowly over it. Steve’s torso pulsed up with Billy’s grip tightening around him, and then he melted into the mattress, Billy’s heat making the fairy lights around him spark in new ways.

“Holy shit, Billy...”

He bottomed out, giving a little swirl of his hips to get comfortable. Or maybe it was to make Steve’s head explode. He swallowed—a thick, wet sound—as Billy gazed down at him: hair splashed across the pillow, his mouth open and the arteries in his neck engorging between desperate breaths. “You feel good?”

Steve nodded, a weak, high-pitched whine escaping him. His hands slid up Billy’s thighs. “You gonna move?”

“When I’m ready. I wanna look at you first. Calling me beautiful...do you have any idea what you look like?”

He moved the pad of his thumb over Steve's lips, tugging ever so slightly on the bottom one. Answering his unspoken question, Steve's mouth opened, his teeth dragging over his knuckle before giving Billy his tongue. Billy didn't intrude more than playing with the tip, feeling Steve's slick warmth as he eased himself up and thrust back down.

Steve sucked on his thumb, catching his voice on Billy before his lips parted and it gasped out of him. Billy watched, enraptured, as Steve tilted his head back, moving Billy's thumb out of his mouth so he could lick from the joint in his palm, up to the tip. Billy could watch that all night, could replace it with his cock and certainly wanted to. But he pushed his thumb over Steve's lips a final time before focusing on riding Steve's brains out. On making Steve forget whatever bad times preoccupied his thoughts before *Billy* moved right in.

He started slow, relishing the little spasms of Steve's shoulders and stomach, and the way his legs quaked underneath him. Then Steve figured out his rhythm, and planted his heels to lift his hips, to move with him. "Do you want me to touch the front?"

"Not yet," Billy exhaled. A grin flashed on his face. "I wanna rile you up first."

"More than this?" he breathed, his head falling back. "You feel *good*, Billy."

Billy's laugh disintegrated into a moan as he went a little faster. "Maybe I'll go easy on you this time."

"This ti—*hahh!* Billy..."

He reached behind him, giving Steve's thighs a mean squeeze that had him thrusting up into Billy in the most delicious way. But Billy held him down and controlled their pace, slowly building while his hands came forward, giving the buds of Steve's nipples a push in different directions until he found the combination to Steve's cries.

"Love your chest hair," he purred, dragging his fingertips through it. "Can you grow a beard?"

“No,” Steve heaved, completely at Billy’s mercy. “Billy, I’m close.”

“Get your hands on me, pretty boy. Make me move.”

Steve was more than happy to finally do so. He startled Billy by gripping the base of his cock like a vise, and easing his hand to the tip before coming back down and *staying* there. Like a goddamn cock ring. “Jesus, you feeling mean, baby?”

Steve just grinned, beautiful and blissed out, red chested and glossy eyed. “Trying to rile you up.”

Billy reciprocated by slapping his cheeks against Steve’s thighs, rolling his hips into a merciless rhythm. Steve’s voice barked out of him the first time, but eased into needy moans with each breath. With one hand on Billy’s erection and another on his hip, Steve turned the one-sided pace into a fluid gyration over Steve’s cock and into Steve’s hand.

Billy knew Steve was on the precipice the instant his movements faltered and got clumsy. Gripping his jaw, Billy leaned down and claimed his mouth, catching the gorgeous sighs and sounds of Steve coming against lips as he teased Steve’s tongue. “Ah! Ahm,” he kissed, and struggled around bitten lips, “*Billy...*”

His hand overlapped Steve’s on his cockhead, thrusting into it with the last of Steve’s hardness still inside. Either it was good timing, or Steve found the switch to make Billy come, but the hand that gripped his ass cheek, fingers splayed like claws, owning and digging into the sensitive muscles, had Billy spilling over Steve’s belly and chest.

Billy rode him until he was soft, and then carefully pulled off. He removed and tied the condom, only leaving the bed to throw it away, and coming back to lie alongside Steve. Reaching across him, he pilfered through the drawer for the wet wipes package he remembered seeing, and kissed Steve’s cheek while he cleaned up.

“You don’t have to do that,” Steve exhaled, trying to take the wipe from Billy, who only moved his hands away.

“I’ll do what I want, pretty.”

Steve's head wagged over the pillow as he laughed, giddy and warm. "Fine. Spoil me, then."

Billy finished and threw the balled up wipe across the room, landing it in the wastebasket and earning a chirped, "Oh!"

He chuckled and draped his arm over Steve's torso. His hand cupped his ribs, fingertips moving idly. Steve's eyes found him but only before his lashes sagged over his eyes and his breathing eased. Billy kissed his brow, piquing his attention before he was too far gone. "Can I stay? I'll leave if you want me to."

"Can stay," Steve sighed. "It's late."

With tired and sore movements, Steve reached under him for the comforter and sheet. His last bit of energy went into crawling under the covers with Billy, sliding a leg over his, and asking, "Is this okay?"

"More than okay."

Steve hummed a content sound and lifted the hand off Billy's chest to point, "Can you unplug that?"

Billy craned his head to see the socket, and the fairy lights went out.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, but I can't be the only one who's noticed that THE SHIRT has snaps! The number of times I've seen gifs of Billy on the Byers' floor, but then read about his shirt having buttons.....embrace the snaps, people. That beautiful idiot is ready to be naked at all times.

[Twitter~](#)
[Tumblr~](#)

2. Billy

Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize in advance if the text messaging format is obnoxious haha I don't have it in me to edit and insert iphone screen shots for this.

Steve awoke to his phone vibrating off his bedside table. Since his mattress rested on the floor, this meant that Steve's phone landed dangerously close to his head.

"Mm! Christ..." he exhaled, hitting the side button twice to decline the call.

Two minutes later, vibrations echoed through the mattress. Steve popped his head up and barked into the receiver. "*What?*"

"You're three hours late! That's what, asshole!" Robin threw right back. "I thought you'd died or something! Get your ass here before lunch rush or I swear to god, you're doing clean-up on your own."

She hung up on him, leaving him to stare at the long list of notifications that were mostly missed calls and texts from her. And the time. Steve groaned into his pillow. He was so, so late.

Sitting up, he didn't meet the brutal head rush of a hangover, at least, but...

Steve looked at the space beside him, and then gave his apartment a once over. Billy was gone, and his bedside drawer had been returned to its place. Steve might've thought the whole night had been a dream if his backside wasn't rigid, and a glass of water with a note caught his attention. He plucked the turquoise ibuprofen tablet off the piece of paper resting on the glass.

Take it easy, beautiful.

Text me sometime. XXX-235-XXXX

Giddy warmth flushed through Steve's chest as he read the note a few more times. Then his eyes alighted on other additions to his table: rings. Frowning, he picked one up. The gold one. Just a wide, gold band with small, circular markings like it had been hammered. The silver band was thinner, with an edge mimicking frayed paper. Steve hadn't noticed Billy take them off, but it made sense...

Shit, he needed to go. Robin was going to kill him if he didn't make it to the university café in half an hour. Swallowing the pill and chugging the glass empty, Steve found a clean pair of briefs and hopped into the same slacks he'd switched out for jeans yesterday. Blue polo and white cap in hand, Steve did a mental check-through that he had everything. His phone only had thirty percent battery, but it would have to do—

Steve rushed back to the table, very quickly taking a picture of the note before rushing out the door.

* * *

"Oh. My. God."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"Gotta say," Robin commenced, much to Steve's preemptive exhaustion. This was gonna be a long day. "I'm kind of impressed. You've been late before but you never exceeded forty-five minutes."

"I got in late."

"Oh *yeah*," she crooned. Steve looked at the monitor and list of waiting drinks. Thankfully, students could fuck off somewhere to wait for their beverages instead of hanging over the counter staring at him. The latter happened during rush hour, but Steve managed to get here before classes released for lunch block. Then a tidal wave of people would be in the café attached to the library. The first floor was dedicated to the bookstore, socializing, and the accompanying noise outside of exam season, but the upper floors demanded silence with strict regulation.

Robin worked beside him, but with no intention of letting him off. She continued in excited confidence, “*The gay bar*. How was it? You’ve got balls for going to the *Neon*. Supposed to be the best lgbt hot spot in town, if you can get in and out without being jumped.”

Steve got caught in a yawn. “What? You didn’t mention that last part when you told me about it.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually go!” They paused mid-conversation for the screech of the espresso machine. It was second nature to them and they picked back up easily. “You’re braver than I gave you credit. So, spill! How was it? I’ve wanted to get in there for ages.”

“It was fun,” Steve said and waited for the steamed milk. “You’d like the bartender and her girlfriend. Super nice. And pretty.”

“Steve,” her tone flattened.

“I didn’t flirt! The opposite: I got felt up, into a fight, and a whole group of amazon lesbians defended me from the bouncers mistaking I started the fight.”

Robin cackled. “Holy shit! You and I need to go some time.”

He smiled tiredly over the macchiato he capped off. “Yeah? We won’t get mistaken for a straight couple?”

She spit a rude sound. “No way. I’m way hotter than you and my short nails give away that I’m a raging gay. T-minus fifteen until lunch rush.”

Steve had nothing to say, which earned a curious stare from his coworker. He ignored her in favor of trying to make up for the last three hours in those shrinking fifteen minutes. He refilled the napkin boxes on the tables, swept the floors, and cleaned out the drip trays on the soda machines. Robin took the first influx of students as he refilled the pastry display case.

“Hey, Steve!”

“Hi, Steve!”

“Hi, guys, how’s it goin’?”

“Robin, you dyed your hair!”

“Robin, you’re never gonna believe what happened in chem lab.”

Steve had to admit that he enjoyed working here. He and Robin weren’t much older than the students, so conversations came easy. Plus, the pair of them had already bonded by, one: growing up in the one and the same Hawkins, Indiana. And two: enduring one dreadful summer in a freezing ice cream shop with embarrassing uniforms.

In a mall that burned down with them inside it.

A shit-load of fireworks had gone off inside the building, initiating the fire as well as caving in the glass ceiling in the central foyer. They both discovered disastrous hero complexes in each other when they insisted on staying inside to get all the kids out of the building.

Nobody died. A lot of broken glass and smoke, but the only lasting injuries were how they both jumped at loud bursts of sound, and Steve gave up smoking. His voice had taken a month to recover.

Well, and each other. Robin insisted Steve was a permanent sore she couldn’t pick off, and Steve returned the sentiment in more ways than one. She wrote about the mall fire in her college admissions essay, which landed her here. After she complained about the spam emails trying to get freshmen to work on campus—

“It’s fundraising crap, Steve! Put a young voice on a call with alumni to guilt them into throwing money back at the school! As if they don’t wring us dry already.”

—Steve piled into her hatchback with her, and here they are.

But it was Steve who brought Robin chicken wings and cheap wine during grueling study sessions. And Robin who bought him groceries and first aid supplies after his messy breakups. Robin taught him how to make a dental dam out of a condom, and he evened their salaries when he was made manager despite her working here longer.

Working in the city may not have been as glamorous as small town

living made it out to be, but it was home.

Some of their regular customers stayed through the lunch rush, either because of free periods, skipping class, or the chemistry lab explosion was truly that epic and needed to be told in detail. Robin listened with the appropriate laughter and shock, but neither she nor Steve had much appreciation for colorful explosions.

So they swipe student id's double-functioning as meal cards, and soon, the café is once more empty apart from the occasional student hovering near electrical sockets, plugged into their computers with earbuds. Steve takes the time to make himself a coffee and devour a croissant. Robin watches him steam his oatmilk and cap it off with a splash of coffee, since adulthood had recently surprised him with different dietary needs. Lactose turned him into a cramping balloon and coffee was too acidic, but he treated himself to the taste when he needed it. Perhaps that was why Robin landed in the seat next to him in the common area as he peered at his phone. She knew.

“What else happened last night? Why'd you get in so late?”

She dug into her sandwich while he stared at his screen, navigated somewhere, typed, and stared some more—

“MM!” he choked around his coffee when she leveled his phone onto the table to see the screen. She could pick up a written phone number quickly enough.

That didn't keep her from chewing slowly, incredulously. From gazing at Steve with renewed and calculating eyes. “You got someone's number?”

He pressed his lips together underneath a glare, and seemed content to go back to ogling the screen until he admitted, “Yeah.”

Robin leaned from side to side, wiggling as if the hard seats would offer more give under her while she voiced, “I'm...impressed? Don't let that go to your head, but leave it to you to walk into a gay spot and find the bisexual. Please tell me you got her name so you won't have a pathetic question to ask when you call.”

"I don't know if he's bi," Steve mumbled.

It was all he managed to say, because Robin gripped his arm hard enough to bruise. "*Say that again.*"

He sighed, putting his phone screen-side down with a clatter, and scrubbing his hands over his face. "It's a guy, alright? I met a guy."

Robin stared long and hard at him before releasing him and uttering slowly, "And...how do we feel about that?"

Steve kept his hands on his face to cradle his head. He took an extra minute to answer, "Fine?"

"Why is there a question mark on the end of that?"

"Because I'm *fine*? I'm *fine*! I'm extremely fine that I met a guy and, um, might've...had him...over."

Robin leaned over the table, her tone menacing. "*Spill.*"

"No! I've never been a kiss and tell person."

"I told you how Izzy lost a nail in my vagina!"

"Yeah. We're both cursed with that," he returned, deadpan.

Robin took her white cap off so it clapped the table and she scratched her scalp vigorously to fluff her hair. "But you *did* kiss him?"

She watched him closely, and felt like her eyes might roll out of her skull at the sight of the shy yet cheeky smile on Steve's face. The soft batting of his eyelashes. "Yeah...I did."

"You kissed *him*?" she squawked.

"*What?* What, why is that so hard to believe?"

"Because you're—Steve, I swear to fuck, if you've been holding out on me—I sobbed like a baby to you after I came out to my nanna!"

"Robin! This all happened a few *hours* ago. I'm still figuring it out!"

Steve was pretty sure what few students took up the café were more interested in them than whatever homework they had. He stood up but left his things behind so Robin knew he wasn't leaving for good, just to supplement his coffee with a cup of water. When he returned to his seat, she was ready with new questions.

"I want to know his name."

He sent her a half-hearted glare. "It's Billy."

"And you're sure that's his real name?"

He grimaced slightly with a shrug. "He's not famous, and he gave me his number. If it's a fake name, he's going to be running with it for a while."

"Valid point." She hummed contemplatively, drumming her fingers against her cheek. "He gave you his number... He must've really liked you."

His peek at her was more concerned this time. "Is that so hard to imagine?"

"No, but..." She pushed her fist into her cheek with a sigh. "Is this the first guy you've liked?"

Steve shifted in his chair, holding his phone like an anchor. "I think so."

"Are you sure? You've never...looked too long at someone? Or enjoyed looking at, like, a certain actor?"

"Maybe?" he tried, but it came out strained. "I don't know. It's not like Hawkins let me explore anything even if I did experience an extra spark somewhere."

She made a derisive grunt in her throat. A sound of agreement. "Slim pickings."

"Hey, we made it out. And Dustin. And—"

Her eyes softened but her tone warranted no argument. "Hawkins is a

place people *leave*. It doesn't matter anymore, so don't judge yourself by it. What did you like about this guy? Something must've sparked enough for you to have him over."

It was Steve's turn to remove his hat and scratch his scalp. "I don't know. He...made me feel special, I guess. Like I was his first choice."

Robin leaned forward, her elbows on the table. "Steve, I don't really think I need to tell you this, but it's not fair to use someone just because they give you relief."

"That's not what it is," he countered, but his voice lowered to the back of his throat, cramped with hurt.

Robin's hand overlapped his for a moment before she eased back in her chair with a nod. "Okay," she finished. "Then tell me about him. Did his devilish smile worm its way into your pants?"

Steve huffed a bashful laugh behind his hands. "No, but he did have one of those."

"Steve, I'm pawing at the glass."

"Okay, okay, uh... He's about my height and blond, leaning towards brown, I think? And curly. Blue eyes. *Really* nice blue eyes. He's bigger than me—"

"Oh my god. You're the twink."

"*Robin.*"

"This is fun! Keep going," she wiggled again, settling in.

He heaved a breath and leaned back, crossing an arm under his bicep while he held his coffee. "He...respected my space. He walked me home, but he wasn't shy. I invited him in but he asked if he could stay. He talked about his mom."

"That's a yellow flag," Robin cut in. "You just met this guy."

Steve chuckled, "I don't think he has a complex."

“How do you know?”

“I think he moved to the city recently to be with her? That’s the impression I got. He said some stuff about his dad being a real prick.”

“Ahhh...daddy issues. We’ve never heard of those.”

Steve whined a mock laugh at her. “I told him about high school. About basketball but mostly being a swimmer. He seemed to like that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He latched onto that instead of basketball.”

“Probably because it involves you being more naked.”

Steve laughed, “Yeah, maybe.”

She waited for him to provide more information, but when none proved forthcoming, she prompted, “Since we’ve already touched on nudity...”

“Robin.” He rubbed his eyes, if nothing else than to avoid looking at her.

“You *didn’t*!” she seethed in a giddy way. “Tell me you didn’t pop your gay cherry.”

“I don’t kiss and tell.” He hoped he looked stoic while saying that.

“If he *stayed over*, what was he *over there* doing?”

“Kissing my brains into goo, that’s for sure.”

Robin’s jaw dropped like she’d unveiled the most exquisite secret. “Steve, it is my honor to tell you, you’re a little bit gay. Congratulations!”

He laughed nervously, once more covering his eyes, before disintegrating into full-blown giggles. When more students arrived, he had to get up, but not without Robin pestering him about Billy’s

note.

“So you calling him after work?”

“No? I was gonna text him.”

“Good. Good. Good, don’t want to appear overeager.”

“What is this, the ‘80s? You don’t use that ‘wait forty-eight hours to call’ rule, do you?”

“No, but I know you.”

“Jee. Thanks.”

She laughed with a kick to the back of his knee, making him lose his balance while he swiped a meal card. “I just mean that—like you, yourself said—you met him a few hours ago. At least use a twelve-hour grace period.”

Steve gave it ten, because his phone got to fifteen percent battery and staring at the note would burn it down to zero in no time. Navigating to his contact list, right there at the top, he tapped the newest addition: *Billy*.

Hey it’s Steve.

Congrats on having your mom back. Should’ve said that last night.

Btw you left a couple of your rings at my place?

Phone’s on 12% ttyl

His heart sped faster around his chest with each message, typing fast and loose until he turned his phone off in a hurry. Was it too much, mentioning his mom? Steve thought it might be a nice thing to do? Then again, things Steve thought were *nice* tended to weigh differently with other people... But too late now, and both Steve’s panic and the general good idea to reserve some battery for an

emergency call kept him from opening his messages for the rest of his shift.

Robin, bless her, didn't leave him to do clean-up on his own. The café closed at four, but he didn't drag his feet into his apartment until almost eight. The dusky light cast his place in a blue haze as he toed off his shoes, and left his clothes in a heap to land on his bed in his underwear.

He sighed, long and slow, and then inhaled lungs full of Billy. His eyes popped open before sagging closed, relishing the flirtatious mixture of Billy's fresh cologne, the fruit and spice of his hair, the musk of his cum. All of Billy smelt *warm*, like summer evenings spent with watermelon and pop, and *holy shit, you met this guy yesterday, calm down*.

After adjusting his erection in his underwear, Steve rolled over to plug in his phone. It turned itself on, and messages from Billy descended over the lock screen.

Steve threw himself off the bed to get in the shower. He didn't trust himself to type anything sensible and—frankly—didn't want the smell of his work polluting the current, glorious state of his sheets.

Steve, it is my honor to tell you, you're a little bit gay. Congratulations!

He sent his hard-on a pointed look while he washed conditioner out of his hair. He shoved it down to get the towel around his hips and eased his wide-toothed comb through his hair.

You can't jack off to a guy and then text him. Have some fucking class, Harrington—

You're really treating this like it's not a fuck buddy situation.

That nasty little thought stopped him in his tracks. In an instant, he realized Robin might've been doing him a kindness, merely mistrusting Billy's integrity without outright telling him, *You met him at a club, Steve. It's the park and plaza for sex partners. Don't text him immediately. You're supposed to text when you're horny. That's the rule.*

Well, he certainly blew that one.

Leaving the bathroom, it was some sad comfort to himself to pull on yesterday's boxers and shirt. They weren't dirty, after all—got removed way too quick for that. Steve realized if he had any hope of getting food down right now, it would have to happen before he faced his phone. He shoved some leftover pizza into his oven, arranged his laundry duffel bag for the laundromat tomorrow, and opened his computer to eat and watch something streaming.

He was mid-bite through the crust when his phone lit up. A picture from Billy.

With his mouth pried open like a dog with a bone, Steve opened his messages. A picture of the pastel sunset, high above the city skyline, dusted his cheeks with pink and purple light. What kind of hookup sends the most romantic fucking picture—?

Steve's typing before he even knows it. *That's pretty! Is that where you work?*

Then he scrolls up to read Billy's previous messages:

Haha hey

You went to work without charging your phone?

How's that bruise lookin'?

Then the ellipsis of a new message being typed bumped the others up.

B: Yes and no. I kind of work fr my mom and it's the view off her balcony. Good right?

S: I'm actually a good employee and don't need the battery. Usually.

S: I won't be ready for any swimsuit photo shoots anytime soon. Let's put it that way.

S: *You weren't lying when you said you came into money. What's your mom do?*

B: *Senior editor. I'm reading more than I ever had to in high school fuck*

S: *Haha! Price for such a nice view?*

S: *Do you like reading?*

Fuck. *Rein it in, Steve.* He breathed like he was readying for a swim meet or something. *He freaking lives with that view?* Steve felt way in over his head. Also felt really inclined to ask what Billy liked to read.

B: *Oh yeah? What do you do then, pretty?*

S: *I work at one of the colleges.*

B: *I don't get to know which one?*

B: *I like reading when it's my choice. But mom's work gives me a lot of options far as genres go. I've been roped in*

S: *There are a lot of colleges lol It's not recognizable like NYU or anything. But it's next door.*

B: *National Library of the Arts College?*

S: *Jesus how'd you know that so fast?*

B: *Haha I walk around the city a lot. Really a lot. So you wander around the south side huh?*

S: *Yeah but my favorite places are up around Harlem.*

B: *Tell me about 'em.*

Pizza bones forgotten, Steve let his computer keep playing *The*

Witcher while he scooted himself to sit against the wall. He plugged in his fairy lights before trying to convince himself not to write a whole essay.

S: My friend has a communications/media/art degree (she changed it 3 times, I lost track) and used it to drag me to every museum and hipster chic café, I swear. But we found really good spots. Amazing bagel sandwiches, sangria, and street art.

B: Why'd she change it so much?

S: I distinctly remember her saying something like 'if there isn't enough of a foundation for me to write my thesis on lesbians, then male professors don't deserve my research' So...I guess she had to find the right calling lol

B: Woooooow haha I take it she's gay? Good.

B: Tell me about these bagel sandwiches. Don't leave out the sangria.

Good. Fucking good. Steve flopped over his pillow, exploding another canopy of Billy smell around him. Steve spent exactly 1.5 seconds convincing himself to not think Billy might be jealous. 1.5 seconds wasted.

S: Yes my best friend's a girl. A raging gay, her words.

B: Lol you have a real talent for befriending lesbians

S: I told her about the fight. She really wants to go to Neon

B: For the fights or the girls?

S: Haha I guess I should've asked her to clarify

B: So these bagels...?

S: Okokok think pb&j but on a cinnamon-blueberry bagel and it's crushed

like a panini. Turkey and cranberry sauce on an everything. Billy, I'm not freaking kidding, they served me poached eggs on an open-faced bagel with avocado and hot sauce and I about married the waitress. If I got drunk on the white sangria, I would've proposed. It's a good thing I didn't, because I think her boyfriend made the sangria.

B: You should marry him then. Marry the people cooking the food, not delivering it.

*S: *stars emoji* Now there's an idea.*

B: Haha do I get to know the name of this place or do I gotta wait for you to ask me out?

Steve gaped at that message. Some magical mumbo jumbo was happening on his computer screen but he cared more about the sparks flying on his phone.

S: Um I don't have anything clever to say other than a yes? But I need to wait for my next paycheck. Sorry for the bubble burst

B: You haven't burst anything. I can pay. Then when you get paid, we go back for drinks on you.

Steve's wild nerves locked together into a shifting knot. Something seemed really too good to be true to all this. He took some time to listen to his computer while he cleaned his plate in the sink.

He knew the reality was that Billy probably left his rings on purpose. But who leaves jewelry at a stranger's apartment? *Nice* jewelry. Steve recognized the embossed letters and numbers inside the rings from his mother's jewelry collection. He knew real silver and gold when he saw it.

He returned to his bed and another message. B: *Did I scare you off?*

S: *A little. I don't think I've ever had a hook up go well enough to plan a first and second date before.*

S: *What if I kept your rings and never texted?*

B: *I know where you live. I'd come get them.*

S: *That doesn't sound threatening at all.*

B: *Haha I'd ask nicely. Fr real tho, I can't believe ur building doesn't have front security. How often do neighbors have robberies?*

S: *Not as often as you'd expect, but I have helped a lady move out of a guy's place in the middle of the night. She gave me the promise ring he gave her as thanks. Pawned and paid a month's rent.*

B: *God you're so nice. You're lucky he didn't beat ur ass*

S: *We were stealthy haha I stayed in the hall while she moved everything out to me. Breakup ninjas.*

B: *Lol! Incredible.*

B: *What're u doing right now?*

S: *Failing at watching The Witcher*

B: *Watched it w mom. She tore it apart lol*

S: *Too many boobs?*

B: *Not enough foreplay, she said. Bad transitions into the sex scenes.*

B: *People who live that long would know the fun in it. & have the patience.*

B: *Can't say I disagree ha*

S: *Omg your mom sounds cool as hell.*

B: *She's pretty great. Do you like it?*

S: I expected the dragon to look cooler. The butt chins make up for it I guess

B: Ha! Is that ur thing?

S: No lol right now my sheets are my thing

B: Laundry day?

S: They smell like you duh

Steve pressed his fingers in spirals over his eyes. He felt bad for blowing off the dates but also worried that he was not navigating this *thing* well at all. The mischievous brat in his head reared its handsome head, so Steve listened to it.

S: Seriously why do you smell so good? Unbelievable.

B: Ha! Real enough, pretty boy. You've got my rings to prove it. What's the top note you smell?

S: You're so full of it lol

S: Your cum and cologne. But it's something else. Almost brown sugary? But...in a floral way.

S: Why are you asking me to describe this lol my sex appeal just went out the window

B: Haha I wanted to know. It's hot that you like my smell. Obviously I said I like yours last night. There's nothing weird here.

B: It's probably the hair serum my mom's pushed on me. Turns my hair into proper curls, tho, 'stead of a lion's mane.

S: Omg I'm putting the lion emoji next to your name right now.

B: Don't u dare

Steve's fingers moved at the speed of light, and then he grinned like a kid as he sent a screenshot of their messages with Billy's name at the top, bookended by lions on either side.

S: :P

The texting ellipsis, and then, B: *tongue emoji*

S: *Sir. Are you flirting with me?*

B: *Bout time you noticed.*

B: *Will you call me sir in bed?*

S: *Absolutely never.*

Steve giggled as he moved under his covers and wiggled deeper into them.

S: *What are you reading? (Are you allowed to tell me?)*

B: *No but I will anyways. It's some gothic lit thing. Vampires involved.*

S: *I tried to read Frankenstein once. Went horribly.*

B: *That's a bold choice for anybody. The vocab is ridiculous in that. And it's all tragedy.*

S: *You don't like tragedy?*

B: *I'm a romantic what can I say?*

S: *Some people think tragedy is romantic*

B: *I think R&J is garbage. I really don't know why mom chose me for this.*

S: *R and J?*

B: *Romeo and Juliet.*

B: *These people worship Shakespeare omg Steve it's really ugh. Should've seen the way mom's colleagues looked at me when I ripped the guy.*

S: *Aw no Shakespeare in the Park then?*

B: *Mom's taken me to see Midsummer and Tempest. Sorry baby but no. I can't do any more haha*

S: *Those are the funny ones, right? Least you got that.*

B: *Oberon and Puck were gay as hell fr one another, I'll give it that. They might've taken the whole "fairy" thing a bit literal. Not complaining but. My dad used the slur sometimes.*

Steve didn't know what to say. Homosexuality wasn't even a *thing* in his house growing up. Not even to be ridiculed until he learned slurs through classmates. He realized that might be worth saying.

S: *At least you knew, right? My friend (raging gay) almost attacked me, she was so mad. Thought I'd been keeping it from her.*

S: *UH I might've talked a little bit about you. I was 3 hours late to work. Kinda had to. I'm really sorry!*

B: *LOL 3 whole hours? Fuck, it was good fr u then? ;)*

B: *U work together?*

S: *Yeah. Grew up in the same town too. We moved here together. She told me congratulations haha She's been really cool about it. Apart from the initial attack.*

Billy's ellipsis bumped their messages up but Steve rapidly typed, S:

I'm sorry if I'm...giving mixed signals. I'm trying to figure this out. Trying to figure me out.

Pause.

The dot dot dot went away and then reappeared. B: *I'm not trying to incite any crisis. But if u like me, then I'm on board.*

Steve had to stare at that for a while. S: *On board for what exactly? Are we hookups or—this is dumb I'm sorry. We literally met like 20 hours ago*

And then Billy typed, B: *You're a relationship type of guy huh*

B: *Well I did offer up two dates. It's up to you. I'll be here.*

Steve watched his computer without really listening. When he decided he didn't think it was fair to leave Billy hanging with that, he typed, S: *I think maybe I need time.*

He put his phone on the floor so it remained visible if the screen lit up, but Billy never got back to him. Either vampires, his mom, or his choice took him away from his phone, and Steve respected that.

The evil corner of his brain mentioned that Billy didn't have to wait for him. Mimi and Feiga had known him on sight, so he was a regular at the club. Probably had a slew of numbers above Steve's in the alphabet.

He turned his phone screen-side down, unplugged his lights, and listened to British voices until he felt sleep arrive.

* * *

Steve woke up to another picture. The sunrise.

S: *Do you sleep?*

It wasn't until he moved along the subway platform to get to the last car that he felt his phone vibrate. Plopping himself down into a seat, he read Billy's reply: *Sometimes haha*

S: *Is that why you're reading about vampires? Friends of yours?*

B: *I'm too tan and hot to be one of those*

S: *Uh huh. I'll believe it when I see you in the daylight.*

S: *Subway time. Bad signal.*

He could walk to work, and certainly did usually, but today he wanted to just plug himself into his music library, and let the train lull him into mindlessness.

Billy was being sweet to him. Really sweet. Steve didn't know what to do. In the back of his mind whispered Mimi and Feiga's warning, but Billy had yet to be anything worse than a menacing tease or an arrogant brat. And when he wasn't those, he was flirty, literate, and extremely out of Steve's league.

Steve hugged his backpack to his chest, resting his chin on it with his eyes closed.

Robin had a tea waiting for him when he walked into the café. "Why're you here so early?"

"Ran out of books. I use the library to read. One of the librarians has a real stick up her ass, though. I have to walk in wearing my regular clothes to even be allowed upstairs."

She went with him into the kitchens at the rear of the café. The bakers were listening to reggae and sent cheery greetings to them as Steve and Robin hauled the stack of trays on wheels to the display case.

Steve snorted softly, "You're not recognized in a polo?"

"People don't really look at service industry workers," she groaned

with a dash of chastisement. “Remember Scoops?”

“I remember you being the kids’ doormat.”

“Oh, like you weren’t? Who let his little friends through the back halls to watch R-rated movies?”

“I’m cooler than you,” he taunted before focusing on sliding the lemon pound cakes into their spot.

“Not cooler than Erica Sinclair, much as that little brat hustled us. She belongs on a debate team or those young government leadership thingies.” Robin paused to slide a tray back onto the wheeled carrier and picked up another laden with chocolate covered strawberries. “Still, you’d think the damn librarians would know *me*. I used to sleep here during finals. What’s up with you? You’re surprisingly a morning person, usually.”

“I’m still catching up on sleep.” In went the almond croissants.

Robin shamelessly set aside a kebab stick with pineapple drizzled in syrup. “Spent all night talking to Billy?”

“No, I passed out before ten.”

“Is that the issue? You wanted him to keep you up?”

“No,” he heaved as if this were the last thing he wanted to talk about. But he relinquished, “I think I’m in over my head.”

Robin closed her half of the display case to lean against it. “Really? I never thought I’d see the day when The Hair Harrington admitted something like that.”

He closed his side with a bit more slam than he meant to. “He woke me up with a picture of the *sunrise*, Robin.”

The scrutiny and mirth began to fade from her features as he continued, “He offered to pay for our first date until I get paid. He left his freaking rings at my place so I would definitely use his number.”

"I'm realizing something," she purred like she didn't want to spook the idea before it fully developed.

"Yeah? Well realize it over the with the soda machine. Sprite needs a refill."

He pushed the trays back into the kitchens and brought out the heavy and locked cash register drawer. While installing it and counting through everything, Robin prepped the espresso machine behind him. "How many times would you say that you and Nancy almost broke up?"

She succeeded in thoroughly baffling him. "Nancy? Why are you bringing up Nancy? That was—shit, that was almost ten years ago..."

"But would you say she was your last big time relationship?"

"I mean," his weight shifted as he thought back over his twenties. "What are you—Why?"

The answer was a solid yes, but he didn't want to admit that his first serious relationship had also been his last. He turned back to the register and defended weakly, "It isn't for my lack of trying."

"That's what I'm saying." She walked backwards to lean against the counter beside him. "It's always been you trying. You apologizing. I don't think you're used to somebody trying right back."

"You can't put that on Nancy." He closed the register halfway through and hoped he'd been right when he counted everything yesterday. "I was seventeen—she was sixteen. We didn't know what we were doing—"

"Jeez, over seven years and you're still defending her." Robin's head rolled over her shoulders as she stepped forward to be more productive than him.

"She and Jonathan live in the city too, you know. They're our friends. Why are you being a dick?"

"Okay, fair, I'm sorry," her tone softened. "I'm only trying to say—"

“You’re saying my entire life’s been a bad streak. I get it.”

She rotated to give him her full attention. Steve unwillingly met her gaze above crossed arms. “Look. I haven’t met the guy, obviously, and it’s always smart to be wary of strangers from clubs, but there isn’t really a different protocol to dating a guy—or so I’ve heard.”

That earned a brief laugh from him. Robin rolled a shoulder. “If you like him, then like him. And if he turns out to be shitty, then dump him. Just try not to land in a situation where I have to argue with you over seeing a doctor.”

He inhaled deeply to blow out a sigh that sputtered his lips, but the tension had passed. “No promises on that.”

She smiled and then perked up, “Can I see the picture he sent?”

That surprised him but he willingly withdrew his phone and showed her the same skyline at dusk and dawn. Steve let Robin whistle over his phone while he unlocked the café doors early for the sprinkling of students outside. Some of them dumped themselves into the cushioned chairs to escape the humidity. A couple mumbled rough good mornings to him and waited for him to return behind the counter to ask for coffee and a strawberry.

Robin otherwise scrolled through his messages. He expected her to. He didn’t have anything to hide from Robin at this point. Goodness knew how often she had outright given him her phone to break up with people for her.

“He lives there?” she finally said.

“I think it’s his mom’s place, but yeah.”

“You might’ve landed yourself a—and I mean this with complete irony at your broke circumstances—a sugar daddy.”

“By proxy?” he laughed over a frappuccino. “I’m not spending his mom’s money. She sounds cool from what little he’s said.”

“If he’s on his way to being a senior editor...damn, dude. Stick with him just to see what happens.”

"I am not your sitcom," he retorted, earning a giggle from the owner of the strawberry frap. He smiled at her and then hit the underside of Robin's hands, casting his phone into the air for him to catch. "Rise and grind, Buckley, we got beans to stew."

Robin called him a hypocrite for making himself another tea while she manned the counter. He laughed at her when he made her one too and she burned her tongue. Steve cleaned up a spilled juice drink and replaced it with a free lemonade because he recognized one of *those* days. Robin heckled him about giving out food when meal cards were empty, and then poured cups of tomato soup to students with empty wallets and full eye bags.

So it went.

Robin lifted a hip to halfway sit on the counter while she began to eat her lunch. "It's a wonder we haven't been fired."

Steve sauntered toward the doors to collect neglected trays from the outdoor tables. "We see the general manager, what? Twice a semester?"

"He must be sleeping with one of the deans because he doesn't do shit."

Steve laughed but immediately took off his hat outside to ruffle his hair and will the humidity away. Holding the cap under his arm, he made a quick lap around the pavement for debris, trays, and to push chairs in before lifting his hip to scan his id card hanging off his slacks' belt loop. He hip-checked the handicap button since his hands were full, and scampered into the air conditioning.

"It's *March*, what the hell?"

Robin said something like, "I know," around her food. She swallowed, "I don't fondly remember walking around this campus like a soggy puppy. The heat waves are relentless."

"You would think the skyscrapers would block the Hudson from getting into our lungs," he complained from his place by the trash bin.

“Supposed to break in the next few days, then we’ll be back to glorious, New England endless winter.”

“Great,” Steve chirped while tapping his fingertips together, gauging the unpleasant stickiness. Pivoting his stride, he announced, “Bathroom.”

“Yeah,” she acknowledged, and rolled up her sandwich paper into a ball. She stabbed a fork into her pasta salad as the humidity began to reach her through the slowly closing handicap door—

She raised her eyes as if to command the thing to close faster, but instead stared into a shit-eating smirk. In an instant, she knew, “*You* don’t go here.”

“No?” the guy said. “What gave me away?”

“You look like you accomplished something. Only tired, dejected students eat here.”

His brows lifted whereas his eyes locked onto her salad. She defiantly shoveled pasta into her mouth and said rudely, “I graduated. Now I’m only exhausted, dejected, and work here. What do you want?”

His eyes squinted like he might wink at her but, thankfully, didn’t. “I’m going to go out on a sturdy limb and guess that you’re Raging Gay?”

It was her turn to narrow her eyes at him, but she didn’t so much as see him as she did her own words in memory—specifically the recent memory of reading Steve’s text messages...

Blond hair. Leaning towards brown. Curly. Blue eyes. Same height but bigger.

“You’re Billy.”

“Thank goodness.” He let his head hang a little with relief. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if Steve had more than one coworker. Speaking of, where’d he run off to?”

“Ladies’ Room.”

“Toilet trouble?”

She snorted, “No. He puts more work into his hair than I do. He loathes hats. He’ll be primping for a minute, though I don’t know why he bothers. Manager can wear or not wear whatever he wants.”

Billy’s features opened. “Manager? For some reason I didn’t expect that.”

“A valid assumption. I am more competent and have worked here longer.”

“Then why aren’t you manager?”

“I have a vagina, dingus. College is a *business*. They’re not actually trying to practice progressive thought.”

“Glad I didn’t go, then,” he replied smoothly, but his features changed like an idea itched his brain. He even stroked a finger behind his ear as if to dislodge it. “Though I keep being pressed to try.”

Robin planted her palms on the counter. “You might as well be candid. I know you’re loaded. I told Steve he should date you for your money.”

Billy laughed, not bothered at all. In fact, he tilted his hips to lean them against his side of the counter. “I keep trying to nudge him with money but he doesn’t take the bait.”

Her head nodded to the side as she clicked her tongue. “He comes from money, that’s why. The dingus wants love, not monetary favors. Even though those would keep the wifi on.”

Billy leaned his head back briefly, absorbing that before saying, “Comes from money. Elaborate.”

“As in *everyone* in our hometown knows the Harringtons. Richest assholes in a fifty mile radius.”

Those sculpted, dark brows lifted again, assessing and finding that both humorous and...something else Robin could not name. Aloud,

he put together, “Steve Harrington.”

“Yeah, so if you’re trying to wine and dine him, just know that he can probably pronounce the French better than the snobby waiter.”

Honest intrigue eclipsed Billy’s face. “Really?”

He watched her heave a sigh under rolling eyes. “Yeah. All the girls went nuts over the freshman who tested out of a foreign language. Idiot never did anything with it, though. While we’re on the subject, it’s my job as his man of honor to scare you off. Shall we begin?”

Billy grinned. “Yes, please.”

Robin’s tone lowered as she spoke. “He’s got baggage. Like, broken and leaking baggage.”

Billy’s lashes descended like he was bored. Something about the micro movements of his lips screamed in Robin’s brain: *BRAT*. However that intrigued her in a different way. If anyone was King Brat, that was Steve. For now, Billy drawled, “Don’t we all?”

“What’s yours?”

“Nice try, but that will remain between me and him. I’ve already given him a few pieces. He hasn’t shied away yet.”

“That’s because that’s who he is. I’ve got an example, if nothing else than to prove I’m merciless. I know you’re dad was a grade-A prick. Steve took that without flinching, right? But do you know about his last breakup? Did he offer you any information in return?”

Her bluff worked. Billy’s mirth faded into stoic calm. He concealed his stiff voice with a lower volume. “Just said something about a bad streak.”

Robin leaned forward for a semblance of privacy. “It’s not my place to tell you, but I think you’ll get it once you know. Steve can’t do another crapshoot. The last three cheated on him.”

That caught Billy off guard. His lips parted. “*Three?*”

"In a row," she nodded.

He gaped at her for an extra second, examining her for sincerity. "You're screwing with me. This is a joke."

"Dude, I wish. All three had hidden boyfriends who left Steve broken and bloody. He bounces back, but I'm the one cleaning him up. I know him. He can't do this again. So if you mean it, ramp up the romance because it's working. He's a sap."

Billy's eyebrows piqued with surprise and renewed amusement. "Noted."

"Those pictures? Golden. Excellent start."

"Oh good. It's nice to know you'll be eavesdropping on everything."

"Glad we're square," she smiled.

"Anything else I should know, or are your two cents over?"

Her eyes lolled as if she could not be bothered to roll them. "He's not difficult to figure out but I've already got your number in my head, so maybe I'll throw you a bone when I'm feeling generous."

Footsteps turned her head to Steve rounding the corner into the room, twirling the adjustable band of his cap around his finger. Listening to something his head, he unconsciously *doo-too-dooed* under his breath until his sneaker screeched at the sight of Billy.

A small smile cracked Billy's face whereas Robin had a distinct *don't just stand there, idiot* look on her face. Steve croaked out an, "Um," and went to stand with Robin behind the counter. He waved a hesitant finger between them. "Have you, uh...met?"

Robin and Billy's heads swiveled away from him to look at each other as if they shared a brain, but the latter smirked. "I don't actually know your name."

"I'm fine with Raging Gay," she returned.

Steve looked visibly torn between emotions as he looked everywhere

and nowhere while motioning between them, “Robin, Billy. Billy, Robin.”

Billy offered a hand and they shook, but something about their comfort together induced Steve to ask, “Was I gone long?”

“Long enough,” she replied. She back-pedaled to lean against the rear counter with her pasta and he took her place opposite Billy. “I almost filed a complaint to the manager.”

“Oh, he doesn’t read those,” he disregarded easily, but he perked up in the wake of Billy’s chuckle.

A silence fell over them, heavy enough for the buzzing and whirring of electricity and machinery to be loud. Steve had enough time to absorb the dark green shirt around Billy. Tortoise shell buttons.

Billy peeked up at the lights and said, “I’m inside, but I had to get here somehow, right? Daylight.”

Steve narrowed his eyes in mock suspicion but asked genuinely, “Yeah...how are you here?”

Billy swept his hand over the counter as he explained, “I was just passing through, I swear. But I figured I’d ask at least one person if they knew a Steve who worked at this school. The *very first* person asked me if I meant a Steve with big hair,” he smiled. “You’re popular.”

Steve shrugged but his knees bent for his hips to sag to the side. “It’s my best feature.”

“Not the only one.”

Robin made a soft gagging sound and announced, “Bathroom.”

“Yep,” he smirked with a brief glance at her marching away. He let his gaze fall as he scratched his face, but picked it up to find Billy gazing at him. “What?”

He shook his head gently, eyes never leaving Steve’s face. “Just... filling in the faded parts of my memory.”

He noted the way Steve's features changed ever so subtly. His large eyes were more ready to look down but peeked up at him. Wary, and...there it was: ready for disappointment. Perhaps Robin hadn't been lying to him.

"And?"

"You're better in the daylight."

Steve's lips parted, and Billy liked being able to see him fighting off a smile. With the sweet down, he went for the spice next. His eyes pointedly dropped to roam over Steve's torso. "You're also leaner than I remember."

His gaze flicked to Steve's hands on the counter, followed the arms up to Steve's face moving a little closer. "You *picked me up*, Billy. Like, what the fuck?"

Laughter burst out of Billy and Steve's anxious but thrilled giggles joined it. "I didn't know if I'd only get one shot. Had to make it count."

Steve's eyes closed while he shook his head, leaning back. "I got in the fight but you must've hit your head on something."

"Why do you say that?"

Steve's mouth distinctly opened but then held onto his words. He changed the tracks of their conversation like it was natural. "If you had told me you were coming, I would've brought your stuff."

"It was spontaneous," Billy disregarded as he picked Steve's hat off the counter. He held the inside of it to his face and inhaled. Steve blinked, hard, not believing what he was seeing until the hat was already on its way back to the counter. "And I wanted to see you."

"Little old me in all my café, polo glory?"

"Better here than in an office," Billy countered. "My mom's colleagues hate me because I work from home."

"It's in their job description to hate the boss's son," Steve teased,

raising his tea for a sip—

Billy took it out of his hand when he otherwise couldn't argue, and drank. Steve swallowed hurriedly despite the risk of burning his throat. "You're so nosy."

Billy ignored him to frown with intrigue at the cup. He swallowed. "What kind of milk is that?"

"Oat, mixed with almond," he replied, not sure what else to do than be honest.

"You vegan?"

"No. My stomach just hates me."

"Good to know," he crooned, and set the cup down on Steve's side. "But until then, how about this: instead of worrying about dates, we meet at *Neon*?"

He gave that a moment to land and for Steve to process before elaborating, "It's neutral terrain. If you want to avoid me, you can. We don't have to have a set time for anything. Are you off on Saturday?"

"No, but I'm off Sundays," Steve said a little quietly, still considering.

Billy grinned, "Perfect," and slid the tip of his tongue across his bottom lip. "Saturday night?"

Large eyes narrowed at him, but over a half-formed grin. "I shouldn't bring fine jewelry to an area known for theft."

Billy made a show of inhaling and sighing like he were at a loss, "Nothing for it but to bring me home then."

The grin lifted into a laugh, but Steve looked *down*...

A curved finger touched underneath Steve's chin, gently sliding off when he lifted his eyes to Billy. "Don't worry about the afterward. Let's just get to the *Neon*, all right? If you hate my guts after that, you can keep my rings."

"I'm not keeping your rings."

"Yeah, they probably don't fit you."

"Is that supposed to be a jab? You sure you're not eighteen?"

"You callin' me childish?"

"I'm calling you petty."

"Petty doesn't wear real gold."

"You're full of shit, you know that?" Steve's smiling.

"Looking forward to being full of you again. Or maybe the other way around, just a little. Nothing scary, just fun."

Steve gaped like a fish, and by the time he shut his mouth, he realized with mortification that a student could be waiting behind Billy and he wouldn't know it. "You're going to get me fired."

"By who, the manager?"

"Robin told you about that?"

"She did," Billy nodded once. "How much do I get to exploit that?"

"You're about at your limit," Steve said pointedly, leaning around him to see a gaggle of students laughing animatedly as they waited for the handicap door to open. Lazy.

Billy glanced behind him but spoke as smoothly as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Can I still text you?"

Steve blinked at him. "Sure? Why wouldn't you?"

Billy only smiled and said, "Wouldn't want you to get tired of me. Not when I'm thinking about how you move your butt to open that door."

Less flirt and more frown cleansed Steve's features as he poised a blunt stare at him. "You were behind me?"

“About half a block down,” he shrugged, leaning off the counter. “Close enough to see you. It was cute.”

“I need to get my body temperature down. Please leave.”

Billy’s eyes flashed, his laughter earning startled looks from the students arriving behind him. He did leave, after Steve shook his head over a smile of his own, and observed the kids turning like a herd of meerkats to watch Billy leave.

Robin materialized beside him like she’d been waiting for them to finish. To her credit, she waited until the students’ orders were done before she cornered, “Still in over your head?”

“Extremely,” Steve muttered over steamed cider.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wanted to end this after another night at the club, but this is already long enough. Hope you enjoyed it!

3. Angel

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahhh, I missed my city bois. There is a discussion on drug use in this chapter ~ I've added it in the tags.

(Also I finished this quickly so I'll edit mistakes tomorrow <3)

Of course, once he has something to look forward to, the week both crawls and skids its way through Friday. Billy didn't come into the café again, but he did text. And call.

Steve was spending an evening at the laundromat, ears plugged with music to drown out the whirring and clanking of washers and dryers. A lot of machines were running despite the room being empty. Steve left long enough to visit a convenience store, but otherwise plopped himself down to guard his—

His ringtone blasted in place of his music, violently startling him so he dropped the yellow plastic bag and fumbled to do a lot of things at once. He barely had time to absorb the lions around Billy's name before the guy's face stared back at him, mouth opening only to gape at Steve's hand being held up at the camera.

"DON'T TALK YET! Oh my god..." he whined, frantically turning the volume down. "Okay, sorry."

"Bad time?" Billy chuckled, albeit instead of quietly for Steve's ears, his voice moved low in his throat, making Steve feel warm, gooey things in his chest.

"No, I just had my volume way too high. And hi."

"Hi," Billy laughed more easily. "It's bright over there. Where are you?"

Steve fidgeted with the hair in front of his face, flipping it to the other side. "Doing laundry. Where are you? It's like, midnight or something."

“At home. It’s ten-thirty,” Billy snorted. “Sounds like you had a long day... Are you wearing a beanie?”

“Yeah?” Steve’s eyes briefly darted to the side while his hand lifted to his hair again, adjusting the dandelion yellow fabric.

“Robin said you felt pretty strongly against hats.”

“The weather’s changing, it’s out of my hands,” Steve replied with a strained sigh as he picked up the bodega bag. “I gotta set you down, hang on.”

Some crinkling and the cracking open of a bottle later, Steve looked down at him from where he’d clearly set the phone on his knee. “Are you okay?”

“Hm? I’m okay, why?”

“I think I’m used to only Robin calling me this late for a crisis.”

Billy laughed. “Gay crisis?”

“You know, for the amount of shit she gives me, I’m literally her number one emergency contact. Whether it’s a break up or she’s out of cereal.”

“You’re her errand boy? Come on, Steve, grow a spine.”

“She doesn’t exactly live in the safest of neighborhoods, and she’s got like, those nuclear periods—”

“Dude.”

“What?”

“Are you serious?”

“You got a problem with your spine?” Steve threw back. “We lived together at one point. I know more about girls now than I ever thought I needed.”

“And how has that helped you?” Billy blinked lethargically at him.

"I know how to get any stain out of my clothes now. I can cook, and the air is fresher with my head out of my own ass."

"Alright, you've made your point," Billy relinquished the same time Steve held the phone up once more. "What're you drinking?"

"Rice milk," Steve paused with the bottle in frame. "A really scary Korean lady runs the bodega near me."

Billy guffawed at that, only for his laughter to get choked off. Steve blurted his own mirth. "Did you just die?"

"No—fuck—the cat just dug his claws into my side, shit." Billy switched cameras so Steve could see a dimly lit but longhaired tabby lounging on Billy's lap. Its head lifted at the sound of Steve's gasp.

"You have a cat!"

"My mom has a cat."

"What's *their name*?" Steve cooed at those large yellow eyes blinking as Billy rubbed its forehead.

"Who cares? The bastard—" Billy started while extracting its paw from the band of his sweat pants.

"*What's his name*?"

"Jesus Christ."

"I've never been allowed to have pets!.... It's not Jesus, is it?"

"It's Edgar. Eddie, who is leaving." Billy breathed another curse for his leg as he set the cat on the floor and faced Steve again. "You're not allowed to like the cat more than me."

"I definitely like the cat more than you," but he giggled so much Billy could hardly do more than shake his head.

"You know what, I meant to send you something."

Steve looked up at him from whatever he was doing in his lap with

the bodega bag. “*Send* me something?”

Billy had navigated somewhere else on his phone, but returned now to say, “Why so suspicious?”

“Oh. I guess I’m old fashioned. I didn’t think you meant—never mind. What is it?”

A giddy laugh burst out of him. “Did you think I meant a package?”

“I don’t know! I’m new to this.”

“New to what? Flirting?”

“General human things,” Steve grumbled. “I’ve been trying to open a box of cereal for five minutes.”

“The bag, right?” Billy guessed.

Steve heaved a grateful sigh at not being alone in this. The view jiggled as he held both the phone and one side of the cereal bag in the same hand. “I swear to god they changed the glue on these things —”

Steve looked out of frame, but Billy could hear the telltale scattering of cereal flying over the floor. “Everything’s fine,” he disregarded, earning chuckles from Billy.

“Is it? Because that doesn’t look like Cinnamon Toast Crunch.”

“I got the next best thing!” Steve held up a little piece of cereal that was meant to look like a tiny slice of toast. “French Toast Crunch.”

Billy pressed his lips together under a frown, humming a disapproving sound. Steve crunched, “Okay, judgy. What are you sending me? Or have I lost your favor?”

“No favors lost,” he replied on a melody. The screen froze on his face again while he went elsewhere, presumably their text messages. “Wanted to give you something to remember me this week.”

“You’re hard to forget,” Steve grumbled, sort of wondering if it would

be covered by the noise of his hand rummaging in the box. “Kind of expecting it to be the other way around.”

“Why?” Billy returned, looked rather pleased with himself. Steve assumed a picture was on its way. “We’ve got a date on Saturday.”

“Yeah, but I’m just me,” Steve’s words mumbled together. “Could basically do far better...than...”

The text message notification descended over his screen, complete with a small thumbnail. Steve is holding the screen almost to his nose before he means to, because in that tiny thumbnail, is a whole lot of *Billy*. Most notably, Steve’s maroon bite marks all over his chest.

“Don’t worry, baby. You’re written all over me. I’m taken for a good long while.”

Steve can hear the smirk in his voice, but he’s already navigated to the message itself and—well, there it is, and there all of *he* is—good god. Steve can barely appreciate the peek into Billy’s room, even if it is just the dark green bed sheets and a rumbled white comforter around Billy’s torso, because said torso is wearing a string of brutal pearls between his nipples.

Steve chokes and yells at the same time, making his voice strange around the panicked, “I’m SO sorry!” He really can’t look away at this point and whines at himself, “Oh my god. Get it together, Harrington, Jesus.”

“Uh, hello? I’m not complaining.”

“I know but...like, there’s a line drawn somewhere, right? I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Steve. I cannot stress to you how much I don’t mind. You were three hours late to work. Either I was that amazing or you needed good sex in a bad way. I’ll stroke my ego and go with the first one. Feels good, to be claimed now and then.”

Steve was too busy pulling his beanie off his head to tug at his hair to notice Billy coming back to observe his fidgeting. “Hey, Steve.”

“Hey, what?”

“You’ll get it in a second.”

On cue, he received a new image: a screenshot of his page in Billy’s contact list, with the id image being nothing but Steve’s wide, shocked eyes looking at Billy’s naked body.

Something might’ve snapped in Steve’s brain, because he exclaimed, giddy, “Hold on. Did you call me for phone sex?”

Billy purred right back, “Hypothetically speaking, would that be a problem?”

Steve gaped like a loon. Equally thrilled and stunned, all he could do was repeat, “You called me for phone seehh...!”

His words swerved to a clumsy finish when his eyes darted across the room. Billy watched him lean back in his seat, resting his mouth on his hand before he flipped the camera. Billy guffawed at the sight of a woman old enough to be their grandmother manhandling an impressive pile of clothing out of a dryer.

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m not doing this here,” he laughed, trying to speak at a casual yet quiet volume. Normal telephone volume.

“But that’s not a definite no, then,” Billy grinned through and through. His damn teeth blinded the camera and Steve’s eyes. He had no business smiling that bright. “Just a matter of placement.”

“The placement is *Saturday*,” Steve reminded around an embarrassed giggle, but that smile wasn’t going away. Hell, Steve could hear his own blush in his voice.

When their laughter faded, Steve watched Billy settle lower against his headboard, curling an arm behind his head. “So, rice milk and cereal but no bowls?”

“You just kinda cram it all into your mouth. There’s no difference.”

“You’re so hot.”

Steve snorted painfully, holding his hand over his mouth and nose before he looked down at it. “Am I bleeding? I think cereal just went up my nose.”

Steve laughed bashfully in the wake of Billy’s guffaws.

It was nice. It was really nice.

And then Saturday night arrived, and his laundry just stared back at him. He once again had no idea what to wear. “This shouldn’t be this difficult,” he said to a crimson sweater. The city air had smelled like ice on his way home from the café, but *Neon* would be hotter than an Indiana summer.

Steve put more money into the clip this time in case the cloakroom charged for that, and settled on a highlighter green t-shirt underneath a black blazer. He shimmied into the same jeans as last time and gave his hair an extra puff of spray. Fortunately, he still had a scarf from a long forgotten high school party; he’d woken up with the glittery, hot pink fabric trying to make do as a blanket.

He dished out the extra money for a cab directly to the alley, and it wasn’t long before Steve felt himself enveloped by the bass and heat of the crowd. Thankfully, he didn’t have to trade money for a coatroom ticket, which he crammed into his jeans’ pocket while he shouldered his way to Mimi’s bar. He planted his elbows on the wood with an excited, “Hi!”

“Well, hello yourself,” she crooned, but her grin was big and genuine. “What can I get the frog prince?”

His brows twitched together. “Frog? Oh—god. The green? You’re making fun of the green?”

She laughed, giving Steve the time to appreciate her glittery indigo lipstick. She wore blue in her waterline but something peachy on her eyes. She looked nice, and Steve said as much. Mimi scoffed, “You’re not getting free drinks tonight.”

“I’m not trying to! Can you start me off with water, though?”

“Wow,” came a lower, but familiar voice, “your pregame material is unreal.”

“Hi, Feiga,” he greeted, and felt his heart swoop up when she reciprocated his body language for a hug.

“What can I put on the side for you?” Mimi said as she set his glass on the bar. “You still feelin’ fancy?”

Steve considered that while he gulped his water. “Maybe a different kind of fancy.”

“Different kind of fancy,” she repeated to herself with a nod of her head. “Do you like bitters?”

“Sure. I mean, that’s pretty vague, but I’m open for trying anything.”

She left him with something like a whimsical smirk on her face. Steve supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised when she pulled the green bottle of absinthe from the shelf, but the final product came to him the color of diluted turquoise garnished with cucumbers.

“Ooh!” he chimed, earning a wild giggle from Feiga. “This is good!”

“Thanks for having such faith in me,” Mimi accused.

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

She left him with his tab and a smirk. Meanwhile, Steve asked Feiga, “What do you do here? You must work here.”

“I’m a bouncer.”

He pivoted fully to face her. “Really?” He hoped he didn’t sound like a total douche for his surprise.

She smiled while lifting up her curly hair, revealing an ear bud with a cord discretely running down her neck and underneath her clothes. “More like a spy. A professional snitch.”

“Right on,” he supported, sipping his drink.

“What brings you here this week?”

“I’m technically on a date.”

“Yeah? So things went well last time? That Billy guy definitely ran out of here like his ass was on fire last time, but the bouncers outside didn’t hear any foolery.”

“No, no, Billy’s fine. He’s really nice actually.”

Feiga rolled her eyes. “*Something’s* gotta be nice about him, even though he typically gets booted out long before he’s able to hook up with somebody.”

Steve sighed in her direction. “He can’t really get into *that* many fights. Nobody would let him in otherwise.”

“Maybe Charlie’s angel simmered him down,” she teased. It was Steve’s turn to roll his eyes, and she insisted, “No! I’m impressed. He doesn’t usually show that kind of control...uh. Unlike now.”

The drop in her tone had him following her gaze into the crowd behind them. Billy was easy to pick out in a cropped, sunset yellow shirt. His jaw was sharp under a gaze leveled at somebody—

Somebody who stabbed a finger under Billy’s collarbone once, twice—and the rest of the hand slid up to hold the mantle of his shoulder.

“Nope! Nope nope nopenope,” Steve chanted. For who, he couldn’t be sure. Probably Feiga, so she didn’t call the larger bouncers in to handle it, but now Billy’s smacking the guy’s hand off of him, causing those around them to give him a wider berth—

“HEY, ANGEL,” Steve boomed, startling the pair of them so Steve could put an arm behind Billy’s ribs. He held out his drink, sufficiently sandwiching Billy in his arms while also offering a weapon, should they need it. “Sorry I took so long! Mimi’s in the weeds over there. You okay?”

Never mind that Mimi stood behind a half-empty bar, or how the glass was a third empty. He lifted a brow at the taller man—

Fingers pressed into his cheek, turning his face as Billy lunged for his mouth. Steve caught his hard kiss while Billy's arms encircled waist. Steve's focus split between not spilling the drink and lifting the hand from Billy's back to cradle his head. Billy leaned into it to tilt his head and kiss him softer and *holy shit*.

Steve *missed* him.

His heart brimmed over with Billy's soft lips pushing and his hands pulling. Steve's arm slid over the backs of Billy's shoulders like it was the most natural place in the world to anchor himself.

By the time Billy parted enough to look at him through hooded eyes, the other guy had long since left. "Hi," he voiced huskily.

"Hi," Steve grinned. How could he not? When Billy's voice was *that* warm after kissing *him*.

"Angel..." he replayed aloud. He nuzzled his lips ever so lightly over Steve's, tickling. "I like that."

"I kind of panicked," he admitted breathily. "Are you okay?"

Billy shook his head like he didn't want to talk about it but scoffed, "Asshole bought me a drink once. Thinks I owe him something."

He kissed Steve again, their lips parting so the pad of his tongue met Steve's in a slow, lazy kiss, warm meeting cold. "What're you drinking?"

"Absinthe and stuff," he chimed, bringing the glass between them.

They parted enough for Billy to take a long sip. "*Oh*."

"*Yeah?*" Steve agreed with a giddy laugh.

Billy frowned down at the cucumbers before admitting, "That's really damn good," with his own mirth mixed in.

Steve's palm brushed over Billy's temple, holding his hair off his face for a moment while he said, "It's absinthe, Sprite, and bitters or something. My shirt caused a theme."

Billy chuckled, taking the moment to openly drag his eyes over Steve. "I like it. Do you only have neon shirts?"

"I have an unholy amount of polos and some sweaters. So...yes."

Billy's lips pressed together in a smile. "You wanna get out of here?"

"Can we dance first? I just got here."

Billy's lips met his once more, nodding gently against him. His hands on Steve's waist moved around to the small of Steve's back, pulling their hips flush while Billy's began to sway with the music. Steve followed his lead, lazily making out and sharing the drink until Billy went for a beer and returned with a glass of water for Steve.

They moved to the pink room, sharing both drinks while Steve's gaze wandered over Billy. "You look really good," he called over the music.

Billy smiled like he knew. "Someone told me they liked what I work for. Figured I'd show it off."

Steve pinched the cropped hem of the shirt and held onto him. "They're not around, are they?"

"I don't know. But I'll see him coming. His hair's as tall as a crown."

"Oh my god," Steve whined, leaning back but taking Billy with him to kiss away Billy's laughter. "Would you believe I spray it to keep it *down*?"

"That's what they all say."

Steve's laughter got clipped short by a misplaced squeeze low on his ass. He involuntarily hopped in Billy's arms, the rogue hand in between his legs missing its prime targets—

The hand was gone as Billy wrenched it out of the crowd by the wrist, twisting the elbow around so the guy doubled over. People scattered immediately. The last of Billy's beer splattered the floor as he managed to hold onto it. As much as Steve felt a wild thrill flail in his abdomen, he put his arms around Billy, much as he had at the

start of the night.

“He doesn’t matter. *Hedoesn’tmatter*,” he rushed, trying to draw Billy back, but the man was rock solid. Steve moved a hand down Billy’s forearm and pushed his face into Billy’s hair. “*Billy*, there are bouncers everywhere. He doesn’t matter. Can we go?”

Billy released him with a shove, but one of his arms wrapped around Steve’s waist like an iron band. Steve went where Billy led, which was up the stairs to the lounge room in front of the bathrooms, ablaze with its yellow lights fringed with orange. Once they were both seated, Billy placed their glasses on the black, square table in the middle of the matching furniture. “Are you okay?”

Steve blinked wide eyes at him before shrugging it off. “Yeah, I’m okay. It’s a club. It happened last time.”

But Billy stared, hard, at him. “Before or after you met me?”

Steve couldn’t see where this was going. “Before. Before the fight at the bar. Both times the women saved me,” he laughed.

“You got groped twice that night?”

“No, I mean the grope and then the fight. I’m *okay*. You can chill,” he tried to insist. “I’d like to come back for another date. I can’t do that if you’re not allowed inside.”

Billy leaned back, his arm stretching across the loveseat before he scratched behind his head. “There are plenty of gay spots on this island. Places with better etiquette and cheaper drinks.”

Billy’s attention yanked onto Steve rotating to face him and drape a leg over Billy’s knee. “Tell me about your week.”

A hesitant smile pulled at Billy’s face. “What, now?”

“Sure,” he chirped, kicking his leg gently between Billy’s until the latter’s hands rubbed his knee and thigh. “Reading anything good?”

He shrugged. “Decent stuff, but I don’t read that fast. Mom’s smart, though. She mostly sends me around the city. I’m a glorified errand

boy.”

“It’s better being outside, though, right?” Steve voiced with wistful jealousy.

“When the weather behaves, it’s great, but I use a company car half the time.”

“You get to avoid the petri dish of public transport? You’re living the life.”

“You know, I’d rather use the trains. It’s easier to wander off a job into places with pretty things behind the counters.”

Steve’s head rolled over the back of the couch to glare at him. “You’ve been holding yourself back from crashing my workplace?”

Billy slouched to mirror his sprawl, grinning cheekily. “If I say yes, do I get permits to come over whenever I want?”

Steve laughed, letting the bursts of mirth drag out of him. “I’d say yes but you need an id to get in. It’s just my luck that word would spread like wildfire: ‘hot piece of cake trespassing in the café.’ ”

Steve giggled to himself, watching Billy laugh and laugh. “Cake! I’m not just a *piece*. No way.”

“Yeah, you’re a whole damn cake. I’m still waiting for students to get brave and interrogate me over your last visit. There’s no way you could knock on the café door and not land campus security over my head.”

Billy shook his head. “I don’t see a problem.” He gazed at Steve in that sleepy, warm way he had. “College kids know where to snitch. I’m sure I’d be fine.”

“Depends on how much you distracted me. Then Robin would have no mercy.”

“I think she likes me.”

Steve’s features opened, equal parts concerned and impressed. “Are

you sure? She once dropped my phone in a toilet while smiling.”

“Yeah but you’re her friend.”

“What makes you special, then?” Steve laughed nervously.

“The niche trauma of growing up queer.”

Steve grunted an, “Oh,” but admitted, “Fair. I did kinda steal her crush in high school.”

Billy’s eyes widened as he momentarily paused in pulling Steve closer by his waist. Steve might as well be sitting in his lap, since both of his legs were already there. “You rat bastard,” he laughed.

“I didn’t know!” Steve defended. “I didn’t date her or anything, but Robin told me later on that this girl super crushed on me and Robin hated me for ages. We bonded eventually by agreeing that she was a total dud anyways.”

Billy took great amusement in Steve and Robin’s escapades; namely the ones where one or both of them landed in a downright random situation.

“Who *accidentally* takes a tab of acid?”

“The asshole put it in my sandwich! She must’ve,” Steve proclaimed. “Thing is, I think it dissolved in the sauce, or something, because I shared it with Robin. Both of us tripped out in a bad way.”

“Tell me she’s in jail, because that’s seven shades of fucked.”

Steve shook his head. “After Robin and I woke up in a canoe in the middle of the lake, her ex was long gone. Robin had invited me on the camping trip for moral support in breaking up with her, but I guess her ex read the situation and either thought I was influencing Robin, or maybe that Robin was bi and I was a home wrecker. Thankfully I did the douchebag thing and invited my own friends too,” he laughed. “So Nancy and Jonathan were able to find us with spare oars when we called them. It’s a hell of a way to wake up, let me tell you.”

“Robin didn’t strike me as someone to date a dealer.”

“No no, that was a desperate rebound,” Steve confirmed with a finishing smile. “I had fun, though. Apart from vomiting more than I ever have in my life.”

“How did your phones even survive a night on the lake?”

“Uh...” Steve’s jaw hung open as he thought back. “Thing is, we brought a cooler with us. In it was a bag of stale popcorn, our phones, and a comic book. I think we were trying to have a slumber party on the lake.”

Billy laughed and laughed. Steve liked that. He liked Billy’s hands resting on his legs and the way he lifted Steve’s knee to cover his bare stomach when the air vent above them turned on. Steve finished the story with, “Thankfully a willow tree caught us. But neither of us wants to wake up covered in granddaddy long legs ever again.”

“Why didn’t you just get out and walk?”

“We had no idea where we were!”

“Oh my god. Equally chaotic and useless. If you and I ever go somewhere, we have to lay down some rules first.”

“Pfft, like what? No alcohol after 9pm?” Steve sassed.

“No, like I drive.”

“Oh, you’re one of those.”

“Yeah. I am,” Billy threw right back.

“What about the company car? Who drives that?”

“Me or my mom’s secretary. My paycheck kind of depends on letting him drive.”

Steve leaned into Billy’s arm. “How bitter are you about that?”

Billy leaned in close so his head rested on the couch right by Steve’s

mouth. "If I take the trains, not one bit."

Steve's mouth connected with Billy's, as light as pushing against flower petals. Billy relaxed beneath him, letting Steve set the pace apart from occasional licks up into his mouth....

A distinct roar of sound lifted them both out of the kiss. They peered around before meeting each other's bewildered looks. "Is that rain?" Steve giggled.

"It's one hell of a storm," Billy agreed before cradling Steve's head back down for deep kisses. "Can you imagine this place if the power goes out?"

"Huhh..." Steve answered dazedly. Billy smirked before Steve answered more coherently, "Generators, probably."

"You're never going to let me take you home, are you?"

Steve giggled against his mouth. "Bathroom and one more song?"

Billy pecked his lips and agreed, "One more song."

The latter finished first and scooped Steve under his arm as soon as he left the restroom. They landed in the blue room, where Billy let Steve have his one song and then spent another on his phone. Steve put his arms around Billy's waist to peek at the screen. "What're you doing?"

Billy kissed his cheek. "Getting our ride."

"I don't think I have enough money on me to go dutch—"

Billy kissed the words out of Steve's mouth. "Don't worry about it. You're not getting soaked out there."

At least, that was the plan. After they both retrieved their outer garments from the coatroom, the distance between the exit and the cab was enough for Steve and Billy to sprint under a torrent of water. They landed in the backseat, Steve raking soaked hair off his face as he glanced at an equally drenched Billy. They burst out laughing before returning the driver's small talk, and then braced for the next

sprint into Steve's building.

"Waaai—Ee!" Steve squawked when his shoes slipped on the tile beneath the mailboxes.

Billy giggled around an, "Oh shit," as he caught him and they held onto each other to embark the stairs. "Why don't you have an elevator?"

"We do! It's broken."

"Jesus Christ," Billy laughed. "Steve, you better realize how special you are. I've never felt this close to breaking my neck just to get laid."

"You're gonna hate it when I make you shower first," Steve replied while disentangling his scarf from around his neck.

"Only if you don't shower with me." They arrived at Steve's floor, which thankfully, looked drier than the stairs.

"Did you see my bathroom last time?"

"We'll fit," Billy declared cockily, like he was accepting a challenge.

Steve grumbled a dubious sound as he fiddled with the lock, but Billy was on him as soon as they crossed the threshold. Steve's keys got thrown somewhere in the kitchen as Billy turned him around by the hips to nuzzle his neck, leaving open-mouthed kisses that had Steve's nerves zinging with each one.

"Do you wanna dry off your jacket?"

"Shower," Billy all but growled against Steve's throat, making him stutter his next words.

"Leather gets moldy."

"It'll be fine, angel. Take your pants off."

Leaving a trail of half-soaked garments behind them, Steve felt clammy stickiness on his hands and shoulders as he turned the water

on. Billy took the brunt of cold water since the bathroom was indeed not meant for two people, but the best thing about Steve's pipes is that they got hot fast. They stayed shy of boiling usually, but that just encouraged quick showers to save water.

They figured out that best space management involved arms around each other and locked lips, letting the water warm their backs as they waddled in rotation. Billy's lips slipped over Steve's, quick and eager pecks that mimicked the erections rising against each other. Neither of them really bothered with hair, but managing the soap caused Steve to laugh as he lathered his armpits. "This is weird foreplay but I don't want to smell like a BLT."

Billy's nose wrinkled in his laughter, far more elegant in his cleaning before one of his hands palmed one side of Steve's ass. "Are you still open for trying this out?"

"Mentally, but...I haven't really practiced anything throughout the week."

"I didn't think we'd go all the way tonight," Billy assured, lathering his hands around the soap. "Just enough to give you prostate envy."

"Why do you sound like a super villain when you say that?"

But all of Steve's nerves flew out of the bathroom when Billy's hands slid down the crevice of his ass, cleaning the hole himself. "Mm! I could," Steve struggled against Billy's mouth. "I can do that?"

"Don't be shy now," Billy assured, turning them again so the suds washed away. Billy had the sense to keep rotating them so Steve's back went against the wall. Good thing, for Steve's head fell back when he gasped, Billy's lips on his throat and a finger sliding right in. Mildly snug around the mid-knuckle, Billy just wiggled it around and got right past it. Something...almost ached, but in a pleasant way when he did that, but Steve first had to marvel over the little victories.

"I could never get that far," he uttered breathily.

"It helps to have a better angle," Billy purred, still kissing and

nuzzling Steve's neck and behind his ear. He hummed deep in his chest when Steve's leg lifted, his knee rubbing Billy's thigh. With the tilt of Steve's pelvis, he rocked his hand inside, ripping a sigh from Steve's lungs when that ache ballooned and his cock twitched. Steve's shoulders hitched a little, watching the way Billy looked down to see Steve's front and liking the way Billy's other hand supported the back of his pelvis.

"Do you like it?" he asked, just loud enough over the water.

Steve felt inclined to grin like an idiot. His erection pulsed with his heartbeat against Billy's skin, hard and eager. "Yeah. I think so."

Billy's finger left him and he turned the water off. Drying off was rushed, but Billy grabbed a fresh towel to throw over Steve's mattress. The latter almost made a joke, but Billy also moved a pillow for his pelvis to lie on. The man meant business.

"Relax," Billy chuckled from where he knelt on the bed. Steve didn't really get a chance to do anything but, since Billy took a hold of Steve's hips, and pushed his mouth right over Steve's cock.

Head swimming, Steve's hands pressed against the wall, pointed fairy light bulbs pressing into his ass. "Billy..." he exhaled, "Lemme lie down."

With the pace Billy set, Steve wasn't sure he would let him, but Billy pulled off and went to take the drawer out of the nightstand. In what felt like no time, Steve lay on his back with Billy lubed and inside him again. Only this time, Billy gave the front attention too. With *slow* strokes to Steve's erection, Billy pressed right up against the prostate and moved his hand in circles, easing the entrance open.

He paused to reach up, releasing Steve's bottom lip that he didn't realize he was biting. A small smile flashed on Billy's face as the pad of his thumb stroked Steve's cheek. "You can tell me if it's too much."

"It's not too much," he rushed. "It's just a different...build up than I'm used to."

Billy's response was a long lick from base to tip of his hard length.

Sensation darted between his cockhead and his ass, confusing and invigorating. Steve's hand gently touched the top of Billy's head when his mouth sucked and licked and thrust over the tip—

“AH! Billy! Hahh...”

All at once, Steve's jog became a sprint and he came in Billy's mouth. Billy didn't stop; he pushed another finger inside and massaged Steve's orgasm for longer than any he'd experienced before.

When he finally came down, he felt tingly and light. Billy climbed over him, kissing his torso on his way and giving Steve's nipple a bite. He chuckled against Steve's lurching against the pain, but his smirk melted against Steve's lips catching him. Billy settled on his side with Steve's arms around him, Billy's fingertips pushing into the short hair on Steve's nape.

Using his heel to nudge the lube bottle up the bed so he could grab it, Steve asked against Billy's lips, “What do you want?”

“I want your hands on me. Anywhere you can reach.”

Billy peppered kisses over and underneath Steve's jaw, making him work blind to lube up his hands before slipping a tight fist over Billy's neglected erection. The head went from dark pink to red and shining as Steve eased his other hand between Billy's thighs. “Is it okay down here?”

“Not if you keep me waiting.”

As he pushed a finger inside, trying to remember Billy's instructions from last time, the man himself guided, “Two. Put two in.”

Steve obeyed, and breathed in the wake of the little thrill that pirouetted in his chest at Billy moving his leg around him. With Billy more open, Steve tried to focus on giving his front as much consideration as the back. Billy's little thrusts into his grasp made this easier, also helping him find a rhythm inside.

“Faster, baby,” he breathed, and Steve obliged. His own cock kicked, filling out halfway. But Steve left it alone, entirely focused on Billy's soft moans. The little pieces of his voice that escaped with his breath,

honest and raw. They ricocheted around Steve's chest and skull until he was sure he saw the same stars when Billy unfurled in his hands.

Steve's hands wrung him out, and withdrew once Billy's pressed his cheek and lips to Steve's hairline. It took two tries, but he felt for the drawer behind him and the package of wet wipes in it. "One of these days, we'll start under the covers."

Billy's laughs moved through the air like molten caramel, slow and sweet. He moved with minimal effort for Steve to get the covers out from under them. "Your hair's cold," he commented tiredly when Steve settled on his chest.

The last thing Steve processed during the quick descent into slumber, was Billy's mirth at him pulling the sheet around his head like a nun's habit.

* * *

Steve awoke late the next morning despite the cold trying to drag him back to consciousness well in advance. Unable to fight it any longer, he mumbled, "...illy. Billy? B?"

He sat up, the city's cruel fingers on his skin as he tried to find his source of warmth...

Billy had already left.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this took so long! I'll admit, smut can be exhausting to write lol so I sometimes put it off. But I love how so many of you have been enjoying this fic; it means a lot <3

[Twitter~](#)

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4. Bones

“You look...” Robin deliberated between how she wanted to finish that. “Well. I would come up with something scathingly witty, but you look genuinely ill. Did Saturday go a bit too well? And a better question: what the hell were you doing on your day off? You realize we sell food here?”

“I am not a plague rat,” Steve retorted, “but if you’re volunteering to make all the drinks, that’s fine by me.”

“Hmm...” Robin scrutinized. Steve rolled his eyes while dropping a pair of cookies into a bag and handing it across the counter. “Did Saturday go poorly?”

“It went great. You can stop prying now.”

“I didn’t hear from you all of yesterday, and you come in looking like you didn’t sleep all weekend.”

“Robin, I’m fine,” he reassured. “It rained when we left the club and my body’s still deciding to have a cold or not. That’s all.”

“Mmhm,” she grunted, a paper soup bowl clapping the countertop. “How fortunate that this week’s soup is chicken noodle.”

He resigned himself to blowing on the broth while she finished the small pile of orders. Then he refilled the glass case with cinnamon buns, washed off the tongs, and went on his afternoon break. Technically, they didn’t have such a thing, but during a slow period, he and Robin were largely free to do as they pleased.

No sooner had he started scrolling through his phone, than she landed at his table with a molten grilled cheese made out of an entire baguette. “This better be good. Vegan cheese costs a semester’s tuition.”

A laugh bubbled out of him. “Yeah, when you use a couple pounds of it. Thanks.”

He took his half and precariously bit through the fried bread. Juice

tomatoes greeted him inside. He leaned his head on his hand while he chewed, relishing the tangy cheddar and crisp layer of mayonnaise Robin had fried the bread with. "This is really good."

Robin muttered a, "Thanks," through her mouthful. When she could better articulate, she peered between him and his phone. "Dare I ask what sort of dude-poetry you two are waxing at each other?"

Steve huffed a laugh, reorganizing his hands around his sandwich. "We're not waxing."

Her eyes absorbed his slow progress compared to her own wolfish bites. "I might believe that if I didn't know that you're you."

Steve gave her a deadpan look, but she kept her smile to a minimum while she licked her teeth clean. "Go on. I've officially been single long enough that I'm willing to romance vicariously through you. What post-coital jam and toast has Billy been serving you this time? More sunrise pictures?"

"No, he's been busy."

She frowned somewhat. "I thought you two planned the Saturday date since you were off on Sundays."

"Yeah."

She looked at him, but Steve bit into the grilled cheese. When that clearly wasn't a good excuse not to answer her glaring at him, he peeked wide eyes up at her. "Whuh?"

"Something's wrong. Spill."

"I don't know iph some'ing's wrong."

Robin winced and practically smacked him with the napkin she clamped over his mouth. "Something's not going how you expected or wanted, then. What happened Saturday?"

Steve caught the napkin and cleaned himself up. "Saturday was *fine*. It was great, even. He hasn't talked to me since."

Robin sat back in her seat, processing that. “Really? Even Izzy checked on me after my gyno visit.”

“Billy didn’t lose anything—inside or otherwise.” Steve put the sandwich down to rub his eyes.

Robin giggled and inquired, “Then what about his rings? Are they still at your place?”

“Yeah.”

“Well that’s something, right?”

Steve exhaled heavily, holding his face over the table. “I don’t know.”

“Did you try texting or calling him?”

“Yeah. I told him his rings were still at my place.”

“Did you pose any questions? So much as a, ‘Hey, I’m feeling kind of shitty from the rain. Are you getting sick too?’ ”

“No?” Steve answered hesitantly.

“I’m just saying, he might’ve mentally categorized a text about his rings in some other box than, ‘I should respond to this somewhat asap.’ ”

“Ah,” Steve acknowledged with a curt nod as a student group scanned into the building. Steve left the table to put his sandwich in a take-away box and attend to those who arrived at the counter. The chatter that moved all the way up the stairs to the library grated on his already frayed and weary nerves. Since the staircase marked where the café stopped and the industrial glass and metal library began, the voices ricocheted around the space until they silenced against threatening librarian stares.

“You should leave early.”

Steve glanced at Robin as he filled a coffee cup. “What? No, I’m fine.”

Robin sighed and propped an arm against the counter. “Then

consider this the one nice thing I do for you this year. Get out of here.”

He pointed thankful but refusing eyes at her. “I can go another hour, at least. I’m not letting you do most of the closing alone.”

Robin’s jaw slid to the side as she looked down at her phone. Her weather app foretold a decent plummet in temperature every hour, but there was nothing she could do if the dingus refused to go on his own volition.

* * *

With a pair of scarves semi-tucked into his coat and wrapped around half of his face, Steve checked his messages. Although there was nothing to check.

In truth, he’d sent several messages to Billy. Probably too many, if he was being really honest with himself. He hadn’t sent any today, and after looking over his messages from yesterday, he wondered if he’d qualified himself as the neediest hook-up of the year.

10:59

S: *Good morning*

S: *It’s freezing! Did you make it home okay?*

11:32

S: *Oh your rings are still here lol*

14:02

S: *It didn’t even occur to me that you might have work today. Sorry for blowing up your phone haha Are you okay after a long night?*

17:45

S: *Wow my throat hurts. Hope you’re okay. Avoid the petri dishes. I’m*

pretty sure my neighbor just hacked a lung. The whole city's getting sick.

Steve stopped into a pharmacy for the basic survivor's pack of meds and ordered a quart of hot and sour soup from his local Chinese restaurant. His bank account was officially bleeding, but it wouldn't be abnormal for him to ask his mom for an injection of funds during the flu season. His pride might take a hit but it was hard to care while his immune system felt like a punching bag.

As he tried to rewatch some episodes of *The Witcher*, Robin lit up his phone with conversation and various antagonistic warnings about not taking care of himself.

S: I have soup in my lap right now. Fluff off.

R: Is your hair wet? You only get sick when you don't risk the electric bill.

S: Jesus Christ you know way too much about my life.

R: DRY. YOUR. HAIR.

S: YOU'RE. NOT. MY. MOM. And she encourages air drying the hair anyways. Healthier.

R: So help me god. I'm arguing with Hairrington about his locks.

R: I can hear you coughing from here.

S: That's my neighbor, but it's hard to say if he's sick from the weather or smoking.

R: Quality humanity. What episode are you on?

S: Stalker.

R: We share this account. Don't leave me behind.

S: I've already watched season 1, but I missed some episodes.

*R: Because Billy? *smirking emoji* Any word from him?*

S: *Nope.*

Steve had officially reached the point of not wanting to think about Billy. Thinking of Billy led to replaying Saturday night through his head and wondering where he went wrong.

Is he annoyed I didn't offer more than a hand job?

One hook-up and one date don't equal boyfriend... He has no obligation to talk to me.

Something about that last one hurt more than Steve wanted to address. He texted Robin to wait for him before watching season 2, turned his phone screen-side down beside his bed, and unplugged his fairy lights.

* * *

Billy frowned at his screen in the middle of Central Park. He was taking his usual cut-through when a text message dinged in his pocket: *Answer your phone. It's Robin.*

When the call followed, he answered, "Did Steve actually give you my number or did you steal it?"

"Irrelevant. I need you to check on Steve."

Billy glanced at a pair of mothers chasing after their rosy-cheeked toddlers who seemed impervious to the cold. "Check on him?"

He heard an impatient huff on the other side. "Remember that bone I said I'd throw you? Well you're getting a whole skeleton. He's not answering his phone and he hasn't come into work today. I think he's sick, but if he's so sick that he's sleeping through an alarm and phone calls, then I need someone to check on him. That's you. And I suggest you sweep him off his feet because he's been feeling really shitty since you flaked on him on his day off."

"I didn't flake. I had a meeting I couldn't skip—"

“I don’t care! You didn’t tell Steve, and a romantic sap like him is going to think that a date coinciding with his day off means that you two get to wake up and have breakfast together. Not get ghosted for two days straight. So are you going to square up or do I need to close the café? You need to decide *now*—”

“Alright! I’ll get him, Jesus.”

“Good. You’re free to put me in your contacts as Jesus, too.”

“Absolutely not.” Billy hung up and added her under the title, Raging Gay. Then he quickly moved to his text messages. *Ghosted? Oh...shit.*

He’d been so busy answering other messages that he hadn’t meant to completely ignore Steve’s. Billy massaged his brow bone as he quickly read through them.

Wow my throat hurts. Hope you’re okay.

Billy went into his recent calls and held his phone to his ear. “Hey, where are you? I might need the car.”

* * *

Steve heard the knocking from a long way off, and then abruptly way too close. He flinched against the sound, slowly realizing it was on his door instead of his skull.

Whining unintelligible complaints under his breath, he took half the bed with him to the door. Keeping his blankets and comforter around him, he yanked it open. “*What?*”

“Do you greet everyone like that or am I special?”

“Billy?”

He entered the apartment with equal measures of pushing the door open and Steve moving aside for him. “Robin sent out an S.O.S. Don’t take this too harshly, pretty boy, but...you’re more boy and less pretty right now.”

Steve had stopped listening in favor of going to his phone. He bent

down with a vague hiss of, “Oh, shit,” only to keel over and land on his mattress.

“Don’t worry, she’s not expecting you at work.”

“Please stop yelling in my skull,” Steve moaned from inside his comforter.

Only a hand and some hair stuck out from the bundle. Billy settled on the floor and took Steve’s hand. “You sound like a piece of gravel is in your throat.”

“Feel it too,” said the blankets. Steve’s fingertips brushed the sleeve of Billy’s coat, and ventured to feel more of the black wool. His thumb slipped inside and met the silk lining. “This is nice.”

“Had to see fancy people this morning.”

The comforter moved to reveal puffy, dark eyes. Steve looked over his expensive-looking pea coat that fell as far as his knees. “You look nice.”

Billy smirked. “Only nice?”

“I have a blurry vignette to my vision right now.”

Billy’s features opened like that was the last straw. “Yeah. You’re coming with me.”

“What—Billy!” Steve tried to squawk, but it fell flat against Billy’s shoulder blades as the man used Steve’s hand to hoist him into a fireman’s lift. This involved finding his legs in the bundle, but Steve had the sense to wear thick, plush socks, so Billy didn’t feel too bad about the blankets bunching up to expose his legs.

“Billy, what...” Steve coughed into his comforter. “Where are we going?”

“My place,” Billy replied, grabbing the keys on the kitchen counter. He checked the lock on the doorknob before shutting the apartment behind them.

“Your—like—your mom’s?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, uh,” Steve struggled to say as Billy descended the stairs. “Is that okay?”

“You’re contagious as hell so you’ll be in my room for a while, but yeah, of course it’s okay.”

A sound of recoil came from Steve as Billy kicked the ensuing doors open. Steve clutched his bedclothes over his head, thankful he lived on a dead end street because Billy carrying a body over his shoulders probably wouldn’t give passersby the best impression.

“Mind your head,” Billy chimed before promptly dumping Steve inside a car that smelled new. A very soft bench caught him, inducing Steve to look around the interior. *Company car*, he thought distantly, but also *recognized*. The kind of vehicle that is meant to be sat in for a long time, for business discussions as well as to impress.

Billy followed him in, lifting Steve’s legs onto his lap so he could shut the door. Steve shuffled backward to sit up, but only succeeded in rotating to put his head on Billy’s thigh. Steve didn’t know if this was okay, but Billy’s hand palmed his head while the other arm relaxed around him for the car to pull out into traffic.

The backseat didn’t have the best dimensions for a grown man to lie down, but Billy’s warm fingers stroked through his hair. The backs of his knuckles moved behind Steve’s ear to pet his neck. Steve’s eyes closed and his jaw relaxed for him to breathe through his mouth. He liked the way Billy held onto him during the stop and sway of traffic, limiting his discomfort.

All too soon, the car angled upward and both Steve and Billy swayed heavily against the back of the seat. The echo of their tires going over the seams of a concrete floor told Steve they were in a parking garage. His hand slipped out of his blankets to find Billy’s knee, which Billy overlapped with his own. “It’ll be another minute. Hang on.”

Steve relaxed again on his lap, wanting to just fall asleep here, but his stuffy nose and the impending relocation didn't let him.

The car pulled to a smooth stop. Billy rubbed Steve's shoulder and fiddled with the fingers on his knee. Steve's wild bedhead fluttered around him as he peered through the windows before wincing at the harsh lighting when the car door opened. Billy stood outside with his hands extended. "Come here."

Still clutching all of his layers around him, Steve used one hand to exit the car. Billy immediately held his bundled body against his own as he guided them to the stairwell—

Except it wasn't a stairwell. Something like a mudroom stood on the other side of the door; white tile before a light wooded floor stretched beyond that. Steve glanced behind him at the driver shutting the car door. "Thank you."

The driver—or he supposed Billy's mother's secretary—perked up. "You're welcome, Mr. Harrington. Get well soon."

"Thanks," he mumbled with no small amount of bewilderment. He stepped over the threshold from the concrete parking garage into the domestic space. "I'm suddenly very aware that I'm barely dressed."

"You can use my clothes. We're going upstairs."

Out of his shoes and coat, Billy's arms enveloped him once more. Steve tried to glance back at the wooden pegs on the wall and the colors hanging from it; the similar orange pea coat and turquoise scarf. A light wooded corridor continued to the rest of the space, but Billy led him up the stairs along the wall.

"Does your mom work for the mafia?"

"What? No," Billy laughed. "She's a senior editor. I told you that."

"You live in a two-story place!" he whisper-exclaimed as they crested the stairs and suddenly the whole first floor opened up on the other side of the balcony.

And right there in the living room, sat a blonde woman on the

younger side of middle-aged. What looked like several open magazines, and piles of papers Steve could only guess were manuscripts, sat arranged all over the large coffee table before her. Sensing the gaping silence above her, she looked up at him and Steve waved a corner of his comforter. She smiled and waved back to him. Between her messy, blonde waves and tie-dyed pants under her knit sweater, she looked like she belonged on a beach, not in an office.

“In here,” Billy corralled.

“Where’s the cat?” Steve asked while he shuffled toward Billy’s room.

“Don’t worry about the cat.”

“You said his name was Edgar?”

“Steve, you’re not here for the cat.”

Billy’s mother giggled to herself as she reached for the remote that turned the fireplace on.

Notes for the Chapter:

* We * Have * Arrived * At * My * Favorite * Section
* Of * The * Story !!!

I have a head canon that Steve's clocks are all on 24-hour time because of Dustin (who we'll see in the story eventually).

[Twitter~](#)

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5. Lillian Blaire

It took a while for Steve to understand what he was hearing. Then his head shot up to peer through his headache at the door rattling in its frame.

“Just wait for it.”

Steve turned back to Billy lying beside him. He hadn’t judged Steve for toppling over his bed and falling asleep in the burrito of bedclothes in which he’d arrived, but Billy had slid under his own covers, where he now spoke without bothering to open his eyes. “It’s Edgar.”

Steve squinted over his shoulder again at the loud scratching against the wood.

Then the doorknob started jangling, the door rattling with distinct, heavy thuds. “That’s horrifying—” The door opened and a large, fluffy tabby jumped onto the bed. He gasped, “—That’s amazing!”

Except his gasp startled the cat into jumping backwards, perfectly rewinding his jump so he landed back on the floor. Billy lurched slightly off the bed with his guffaws. Steve’s mirth dissolved into thick, wet coughs inside his comforter. Edgar could be heard scampering out of the room while Steve tried to come out of his fit to exclaim, “No! I’m sorry!”

“He’ll be back, don’t worry,” Billy laughed while reaching for something on his bedside dresser. He rolled over to plant a tissue box above their pillows, and handed Steve a fistful of tissues.

“Ugh, thanks,” Steve bemoaned, equal parts apology and gratitude. He gathered the phlegm from his mouth inside the tissues and found a bin on his side of the bed.

Billy’s eyes moved over his face and the swoop of hair threatening to tickle his nose. “You’re getting worse.”

Unfocused eyes peeked up at him before the lids sagged closed. “You

look great, though.”

A short puff burst from Billy’s nose before he carefully slid his fingers through Steve’s hair, pushing the errant lock back within the confines of the bedclothes. Steve both whined and warned, “You’ll get sick.”

Undeterred, Billy stroked a finger over the bridge of his nose, and back up to massage between his brows. It did not take long for Steve to slant back into unconsciousness. Billy rose from the bed to wash his hands in his adjoined bathroom, and descended the stairs to meet his mother in the kitchen. His gaze wandered the various states of things being chopped on the wooden cutting board, and things cooking on the stove.

“Is he able to eat?” she asked, popping an olive into her mouth.

Billy leaned his pelvis against the counter and crossed his arms. “I think he’s getting worse.”

She wiped her hands on a dishtowel while she considered that. “House calls are an option. But they’re just like any other doctor. They’ll want to know Steve’s medical info first.”

“What does that take? Just...a call to his regular doctor’s office?”

“I’ll ask around. If he’s not on any obvious medications, treating a flu shouldn’t be rocket science. And as simple as processing his insurance card.”

“I’ve got his keys. I can go look.”

Matching blue eyes leveled at him over a smirk. “You’ve already kidnapped him. Might as well.”

* * *

Billy stepped through the poorly lit, but familiar hallway with some amusement. It was different, coming here during the day.

He turned the key into Steve’s apartment and met an altogether opposite environment. The long, radiator to ceiling, window allowed warm, dusky orange light to cut a sharp angle into the space. Steve’s

apartment really took in the morning rays, so the late afternoon's light was broken and made the room a cavern.

But it was still full of Steve. Kind of like parts of his personality had been splashed over the walls, as far as he could reach, at least. Billy smelled him, his laundry detergent, as well as the little bit of sickness clinging to his bed. Billy flicked the light switch—

Oh.

He toggled the lights and only one meager bulb illuminated the kitchen. Hence, the fairy lights around his bed.

Billy went straight to the mattress and stripped what little remained on it. He dumped the fitted sheet and pillowcases over Steve's laundry and moved it to the door to take to his car. Then he pulled out his bedside drawer. It's not like the place had a lot of spots to store personal documents. Billy really hoped Steve either didn't have a safe, or that it features a key on Steve's key ring instead of a combination lock.

The first drawer he already knew intimately. Two boxes of condoms—standard and ultra-thin—a bottle of lube, wet wipes, hard candies, and some miscellaneous knick-knacks. The second drawer was deeper; a makeshift filing cabinet. Billy found what he needed, but not what he expected. Simply removing the entire folder marked *Medical*, he couldn't help but open it to make sure some insurance stuff was in there...

Right there on top, it was hard not to read:

Screening Results: Steven Michelle-Yvonne Harrington

Wow. He does have rich parents, Billy couldn't help but laugh to himself. His eyes dragged over the results, not thinking much of it until he realized what he was reading.

Mouth swab: null.

Hemoglobin: Type O. Null.

Urethra swab: null.

STI: none.

STD: none.

Billy looked at the top of the papers for the date of this information. Two dates were there, one printed for the day Steve had been tested, and the second written by the nurse who had given him these papers. Billy opened his phone for a visible calendar, lining up some figures of his own... The handwritten date was the day before he met Billy.

That was...something.

Billy closed the folder and rubbed his abdomen, willing the ache to subside for...relief. Steve hadn't gotten tested because he slept with a man. With Billy.

He did a sweep of the apartment, finding Steve's wallet, and packed his laptop and charger for good measure. He made sure no faucets or lights were on, and locked up behind him.

* * *

Steve woke up to a weight moving on the bed. Billy, settling back in, except his clothes were different.

"Hey," he breathed when he noticed Steve's eyes open. He raked his hand through Steve's hair. "We're getting a doctor for you."

Steve sighed through a long blink. When his lashes opened, he had the despondency of a sick person dwelling in their sickness. It was almost cute. "I don't wanna go anywhere."

"You're not. We've got a house call coming."

Steve processed that. "What time is it?"

Billy shrugged. "Six-ish."

"A house call this late?" Steve's lips remained parted as he gauged Billy's sincerity. "I can't—I can't pay for that."

"Insurance stuff counts toward this. I went back to your place for

your wallet and medical folder. I snooped around.”

He aimed for comedic relief. He didn’t get it.

Billy’s thumb slid across Steve’s cheek, his tone changing. “I’m not letting your lungs fill up with snot. We’ll cover it. And you’ll take me out for bagel sandwiches when you’re better. Deal?”

Steve certainly didn’t look content, but he swallowed wetly and resigned, “Okay.”

A small moment passed, just the two of them quietly together. Then, Billy asked, “Do you want to eat first or shower?”

“Shower,” he answered easily. Billy helped him up, and grabbed a change of clothes for him to have straight out of the shower.

“You’re not gonna pass out in there, right?”

“No,” Steve barked, or as much as he could in his state. Billy couldn’t help but smirk. The guy had some pride. “But I’m probably about to part with a few pounds of phlegm, so if you ever want to be attracted to me again, you’ll steer clear of the noise.”

Billy scoffed a sound of mirth and went with him to the bathroom directly across the narrow hallway. It might as well have been en suite, since it seemed like only Billy’s room was up here. The curt hallway went directly to the balcony overlooking the rest of the place, but for now, Steve quarantined himself to the topmost corner of the home. Showering felt good. The heat and steam opened his sinuses and he did achieve the ability to breathe through his nose for a while. Enough time to peruse Billy’s skincare and help himself to a little toner and lotion, being sure to wash his hands in between using them. Paranoid, maybe, but he didn’t want to completely contaminate the place.

He couldn’t believe he stood in Billy’s bathroom right now. Well, he could, but not without the details of having only been on one pre-arranged date, and the fact that this was his boyfriend’s mom’s place

Boyfriend?

This all...*did* kind of warrant boyfriend behavior.

As much as Steve *liked* that, something else—bruised, sore, and a little festered—recoiled, and he decided his head was too full of cotton to go further with it.

Billy's long-sleeve v-neck smelled nice. Sparked like his cologne, but clean and not too intrusive coupled with his pajama pants around Steve's body.

Steve, you might have a boyfriend, his pesky brain chimed.

But he heard conversation downstairs, and decided he should just focus on being a cooperative patient and guest. He opened the bathroom door and found Billy standing at the balcony. The latter rotated at the sound and asked, "Do you want the check-up in my room or downstairs?"

"I should probably stay up here, if that's okay?"

" 'Course it's okay," he said, but distractedly looked downstairs to gesture at someone, either his mother or the doctor.

Steve sat on the bed, finding his own bedclothes long since removed. He hadn't really gotten a chance to look around Billy's room, and he didn't get it now. Billy appeared in the doorway. "Steve? Ready?"

"Sure," he nodded, sitting up on the bed.

A woman peeked in at first, and smiled at him with an outstretched hand. "Hi, Mr. Harrington. I'm Dr. Goldstein."

"Steve," he began, but his own hand wavered in the air, "um. Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I've had my flu shot and have all the tricks to being okay. We've got to get you back on your feet. Are you comfortable with me listening to your heart and lungs?"

They shook hands and he replied, "Sure. Do I need to take off my shirt?"

“No, I can lift it up.”

Billy left to wait downstairs. With his door left open, he could hear the faint pieces of the doctor telling Steve to inhale or exhale, as well as conversation.

“You’re wheezing a bit. Do you feel pressure in your chest or throat?”

“Ahh haahhh,” Steve answered, clearly in the middle of having the back of his throat looked at. “Ah eehn—I mean, mostly everywhere.”

“Yeah, your bronchial tubes are clogged up. Open again...”

Billy’s mother placed a drink in his hand, catching him by surprise. She smiled softly, petting his shoulder and going back to the oven. Billy sniffed his drink and sipped the Irish Mule saturated with pieces of lime and ginger. It was delicious and opened his own sinuses. He set it on the coffee table, saving it for Steve’s throat.

Upstairs, he heard, “Well. I’m happy to say: it is bronchitis overlapping a bad cold. You didn’t experience any muscle soreness before this, right?”

“No. It’s not strep?”

“Nope, I’m not seeing any infection in your throat. When was the last time you saw a doctor?”

“Uh...two-ish weeks ago? But I was just getting results back from an STI screening.”

“Wonderful! How’d that go?”

“Good!” Steve chirped in his patchy, sick voice. “All clear. Before that, though, I don’t know. I must’ve gotten sick some time last year.”

“Nothing beyond a seasonal cold?”

“Right.”

“Okay. I’m prescribing you an inhaler and medical steroids to give your immune system a boost. Beyond that: fluids, wash your hands,

and wear a mask if you need to go outside. With the seasons changing, the city is going to be nasty for a while, yet. Hot showers with a lot of steam will help open you up, too.”

The sound of paper tearing off a note pad. “Thanks...I won’t die if I get these fulfilled tomorrow, will I?”

She chuckled. “I think you’ll make it. Any questions?”

“Uh. Payment? I’ve never done a house call before.”

“Ms. Blaire gave me your insurance information to scan over to my office. She’s already covered the co-pay. You’re all set. Do you have a preferred pharmacy? I can send them your info and they’ll be ready for you in the morning. If your insurance plan includes a pharmaceutical discount, that will already be in place at the register.”

“Is there a special pharmacy only doctors know about? Otherwise I’d just choose the nearest one,” Steve laughed softly.

“Maybe some decades ago,” her voice bloomed on her way out of Billy’s room, “but alas, Big Pharma’s made everyone equally mediocre. I’ll send this on over for you.”

“Thank you! And thanks for coming so late.”

“It’ll be worth it if you lay low and get better this week.”

Billy stood to pass her on the way to his room, but she held out the prescription to him. “There’s a pharmacy open late just four blocks from here. Steve should really start his meds tonight. They should already have these in stock, and I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

Whether she got down to business or Steve was getting worse, Billy took the prescription and only bolted out the door after delivering the drink, and a kiss to Steve’s forehead that pushed him all the way back onto the bed.

“Hey!” he called after him.

“I’ll be back in a few. Stay put.”

“Bossy,” he complained, but Billy could still hear the little “Mm!” when he drank his Irish Mule.

* * *

Steve looked around, unsure what to do in the meantime. The correct thing to do would be to properly introduce himself to his hostess, but he wasn't entirely convinced he wasn't teetering on the edge of a flu. So he found the electrical socket and plugged in his laptop Billy had thoughtfully left on the bed.

He messaged Robin: *Hi. I'm alive. I'm at Billy's.*

R: *How is it?*

S: *Doctor says I have a cold and bronchitis. I think Billy's getting me meds now.*

R: *I meant his place. Swanky?*

S: *Thank you for inquiring after my health.*

R: *That's what you get for making your own deathbed—*

“Steve?”

He looked at the woman knocking on the doorframe and failed to elegantly step off the bed. She waved him back down. “You don't have to get up. I just brought some food. I got the impression you hadn't eaten before Billy took you hostage.”

Steve laughed with her and took the plate with high, upturned edges—like a flattened bowl. A deep fried loaf of something sat on a bed of mashed potatoes that swirled with green, like broccoli or spinach puree was in there too. “I'm sorry I haven't been a better guest. I don't want to get you sick.”

“Oh, I'm a mother. I've had everything Billy's had. Our immune systems are something else. I also brought some cat treats, to bribe Edgar.”

Steve exhaled a thankful, “Awesome,” while she receded to lean on

the doorjamb.

“My mother’s favorite dish was chicken kiev. Turns out, a chicken breast smashed to wrap around a log of butter is really good for colds. Especially with my alterations.”

“Oh my god,” Steve grinned tiredly. “I haven’t had kiev in...” He waved his fork to move the ordeal of math aside. “Country club parents.”

She waited while he cut into the chicken loaf. Golden butter and broth spilled out and sauced his mashed potatoes. “Sounds about right. I married down for Billy’s father—Not that—oh, goodness.”

Steve perked up to see her fingertips over her lips. She apologized, “I didn’t mean that less income makes one lesser.”

“I know,” he reassured. “Just like I know money doesn’t make a person better. I grew up around assholes—um.”

“You’re fine.”

“Okay,” he laughed breathily, and leaned down to take a bite of chicken and potatoes into his mouth. He chewed, his eyes widening at her. He said through a full cheek, “It’s like a soup dumpling!”

“That’s right,” she smiled, and wow. Billy’s eyes and nose moved like hers when he grinned.

He swallowed and cut into another piece. “This is *really* good. I can barely taste anything, but it smells incredible.”

She laughed some more and eased off the doorjamb. “Well, I’m glad. Don’t push yourself to eat it all. But if you do, there’s more where that came from.”

“Uh—” he rushed before she left, “—thank you. For...all of this. Especially the doctor bill.”

“It’s my pleasure. Really. Please don’t stress about it. Everyone gets sick. It’s not your fault healthcare is the way it is.”

Steve didn't have anything to say to that, but while he had her, he asked, "What do I call you?"

Her brows lifted with a new level of sternness. "*You* call me Lillian. Everyone else calls me Ms. Blaire."

"Ah," he laughed with a bob of his head. He waved his fork. "Steve."

She smiled. "Wonderful to meet you, Steve."

Lillian meant to finally step out and give him some privacy, but his eyes blew wide and his mouth went slack. "Wait. Lillian Blaire."

She had the grace to look bashful under the scrutiny of his eyes narrowing. "Are you also...a photographer? By chance?"

The humility evaporated and she looked a lot like her son. "You've heard of my work?"

"Nope. But two of my friends sure have. I think I went through a five hour lunch with the two of them ranting about you."

She laughed from her chest, "I'm impressed you stuck around."

He shrugged. "I like tapas bars."

* * *

Billy returned to Steve lying in the middle of his bed, fetal positioned around his laptop while something played. He smiled softly at the scene: Steve lifting his head, a little dazed from being sick and focused elsewhere. Billy shook the paper bag, the sound of accomplishment clattering inside.

But no sooner did he sit on the bed, than Steve grasped his arm and exclaimed, "Your mom's Lillian Blaire!"

"Yeah, I just call her 'mom,'" he sassed, reaching inside to hand Steve the inhaler while he otherwise opened the carton of pills. They were prearranged into daily rows, spaced apart in their plastic bubbles for two in the morning, and two in the evening. Billy popped two out and commanded, "You gotta take those."

Steve accepted the tablets but continued, “Robin’s going to lose her mind if I tell her.”

“If?” Billy waited for Steve to take his pills around gulps of water.

“I don’t know if you want that kind of attention. Apparently she’s, like, famous in niche photography circles. And if Robin knows, then Jonathan will know, and his girlfriend, Nancy, will ask me for an autograph to pass along as a birthday present. It’ll be a whole thing. Small town people, Billy. We’re like ticks.”

“Yeah, well, one tick needs to suck my face before I explode.”

“Wha—but,” Steve tried in between kisses, and disintegrated into giggles against Billy’s lips. As soft and welcome as those lips were, a dull ache quickly bloomed between Steve’s brows from air struggling to pass through his nose. He caught Billy’s jaw on his fingers. “B...I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Or what?” he purred back. “We lie in here sick together?”

Steve hiccupped a laugh. “Your mom’s really nice. I don’t want her to hate me first thing.”

Billy hummed deep in his chest, almost growling. He gently shook his head, like a shark swimming back to Steve’s mouth. And Steve let him. “You taste good.”

“I taste like chicken and butter. Of course I taste good.” Steve gave his face a nudge, not enough to actually move him, but to indent his cheek as Steve fell back onto the pillows. “Take a shower and give me something to cuddle. I can’t hold my head up like this.”

Billy grinned and left, but not before kissing Steve’s forehead again.

Steve watched him go, his eyes feeling heavy as his arm curled against his chest. Almost to cradle his heart. Or protect it.

Notes for the Chapter:

If it walks like a duck, and sasses like a duck, and kisses your forehead like a duck, then it might be a

boyfriend, Steve.

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